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CAPTAIN FLY-BY-NIGHT.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.



SWIFT AND LITHE AS A PANTHER, LANCE LEAPED FORWARD AND THE LASSO SHOT THROUGH THE AIR.

Captain Fly-by-Night, THE COLORADO KING-PIN;

OR,

The Cowboys on the War-path.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "THE PRAIRIE RANCH," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

BLACK WOLF AND HIS MASTER.

"HALLO the house!"

Clear and distinct the voice rung out above the wild clamor, yet with a careless, half-lazy drawl that betrayed anything rather than impatience or uneasiness, though the situation was one that might well have awakened both.

A dozen dogs, of both pure and mixed breeds—a greyhound or two, a few collies, a brace of terriers, with the remainder of the pack made up of "poor relations," with possibly another strain or two added by way of variety to the crosses—rushed from their lounging-places as the stranger dashed up to the front of the ranch, and seemed bent on tearing both horse and rider to the ground without ceremony.

"I don't want to hustle you, stranger, if you've got more important business on hand, but if you've any particular favorite among these yelping beauties, it wouldn't do any hurt if you were to call 'em off before old Wolf shows his teeth and stretches himself; after, it might be too late."

In complete accord with his careless drawl, was the further action of the speaker.

Slipping a foot from the leather-covered stirrup, he flung one leg over the high, flat-topped pommel, sitting "lady-fashion" as he produced the material for making a cigarette, filling the little paper square with tobacco and deftly rolling it on one knee as he sat lazily dumped over in his saddle.

Closer came the yelping, barking, snarling dogs, showing their white teeth after a fashion that might well have rendered a bold man nervous; but the horseman had eyes only for the sputtering match which he was twirling under shelter of his joined palms, to counteract the influence of the brisk breeze which came across the grassy plain.

A shaggy terrier made the first positive attack, and this was the signal for the dogs to close in on the horse from all sides, savagely in earnest—only to be met after a wholly unexpected fashion.

Swift as the lanching of a serpent on its prey, the high head of the black horse shot outward and downward, the white teeth closing on the back of a terrier. One savage shake, then the bloody carcass was flung high into the air, while the horse whirled in a circle, its swift-flying heels seemingly multiplied into a score, scattering the yelping pack with many a howl and snarl of pain and terror.

All the while the rider sat as though unconscious of all this, his form accompanying each

leap and bound of the snorting horse, as perfectly as though he were glued to the saddle, seemingly far more at ease than many a good rider would have been with both feet securely resting in the stirrups.

Two figures appeared in the open doorway, and a stern voice bade the dogs begone in a tone of authority that enforced immediate obedience.

At that instant, the head of the horse was turned away from the ranch, but as the pack scattered, the animal wheeled as upon a pivot, bringing its master face to face with the ranchero—and something more.

Swift as thought, the crossed leg came down from the pommel and the spurred boot slipped into its stirrup; the careless slouch vanished, the smoking weed was thrown away, the trim, athletic figure was drawn erect, and with doffed hat, the stranger bowed gracefully—not to Frank Ellis alone, but to his fair daughter Lina who stood beside him.

A strong contrast the couple presented as they stood beneath the long awning which shielded the front of the ranch from the full glare of the afternoon sun; yet a far less keen observer than the stranger might have noticed the ties of kindred between the two, though this was less in form or feature than in a subtle something that can hardly be expressed in words.

Frank Ellis was tall, gaunt in frame, his face thin and sharp-cut as the profile of an eagle. His skin was deeply bronzed; his hair iron-gray, as were also his long, drooping mustaches. Face, figure, voice and every motion betrayed the old soldier.

Lina Ellis was rather below the medium height of her sex, her figure plump and well-rounded without being at all dumpy. In complexion a brunette, with short curls of lustrous jet, rose-tinged cheeks, red, pouting lips, eyes as large and bright as those of a fawn.

"A thousand pardons, my dear sir—and madam!" said the stranger, recovering from his bow and tossing back the long hair which the wind tumbled over his face, but not returning the sombrero to its resting-place. "If I had dreamed of meeting a lady here, I would have been a little more ceremonious in my approach."

"The apology, if any, should come from my side," returned Ellis. "Those curs are getting to be a regular nuisance."

With a light laugh the stranger glanced around.

"I reckon Wolf and I can stand it if *they* can. I'm afraid, though, there's one or two that will be of little use hereafter. Wolf is rather rough in his play when he gets fairly started, and forgets the difference between fun and earnest."

"Never mind. Won't you 'light and hitch?"

"Excuse me; your name is Colonel Ellis?"

"Frank Ellis. I dropped the title when I left the army."

"And mine is Knight—C. F. B. Knight. I've ridden two hundred miles just to meet you and ask you a question."

With a light laugh, Knight leaped from the saddle and stepped beneath the awning, then motioned toward his horse.

"You have the name of being the best judge

of a good animal in all Colorado; what do you think of my Wolf?"

Ellis glanced sharply into the face of the speaker, but he saw no trace of jesting there; instead, an undoubted earnestness. A slight smile curled his own lip, as he turned toward the animal in question, but he was by far too learned in horseflesh to give a hasty answer on first impressions, and moved toward the creature for a closer examination.

The short ears flew back, the fawn-colored muzzle curled up sufficiently to show the gleaming white teeth, and there was an ugly light in the great black eyes as the ranchero drew nearer, that boded mischief; but a single motion of the hand of its master changed all this. Like magic all signs of viciousness vanished, and the animal stood motionless, calm and seemingly gentle as a lamb.

Slowly Frank Ellis walked around the animal, scanning its points with the eye of a connoisseur, his own countenance being keenly watched by the master of the black horse. But that grave, stern face told no tales, even when the ranchero carried his inspection further, feeling of each limb and muscle, silent and absorbed as though the fate of a nation depended on the thoroughness of his examination.

In silence he drew back from the animal, until he once more stood beneath the awning.

"Well, what do you think of the colt?" asked Knight.

"He improves on acquaintance. Still, I don't imagine you lose much sleep for dread of his ever being hung for his beauty," replied Ellis.

"Handsome is as handsome does," laughed Knight. "He can read his title clear back to old Boston, through Lexington."

"Good blood—none better—but many an old and famous family has been disgraced by an unworthy scion. You asked my opinion, and I'll give it frankly. He's an ugly, vicious brute. He is built to run, and there's only one thing I see to hinder him from lasting from end to end."

"And that?" with a soft smile.

"I fancy he's a bit of a 'cock-tail.'"

An angry squeal broke from the animal under discussion, and with set-back ears, its teeth gleaming, it shook its head at the ranchero, as though resenting the base imputation.

Knight laughed softly.

"Wolf denies that, plain as horse can speak."

"I fancy he understands your fingers better than he does father's words, plain though they were," said Lina, quietly.

"You have keen eyes, lady," said Knight, turning, with a bow. "As your father's daughter, you should know something about horseflesh. May I beg your opinion?"

In silence the young woman gazed critically at the animal, a half-amused smile playing about her red lips. For, the closer one observed the horse in whom the dashing stranger plainly felt such pride, the uglier and more ungainly the creature seemed to grow.

He stood nearly, if not quite, seventeen hands high. His legs, though well-corded and sinewy, seemed too slender and frail for the weight above them. His neck, throat, shoulders, chest and quarters corresponded to his height, while his

head seemed like that of a yearling colt, and his barrel was remarkably short, giving him an exceedingly awkward appearance.

"Now isn't he a daisy?" asked Knight, a glow of enthusiasm irradiating his countenance as Lina turned toward him, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "I knew you'd see through him!"

"Then he is a telescopic horse?" she said, innocently. "I fancy he would look better if properly focused."

Turning, she passed back into the ranch, leaving Knight staring after her, open mouthed. Then, slowly shaking his head, he turned once more to the ranchero:

"There you behold a gold mine, wrapped up in a horse's skin, my good friend," he said, lightly rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet, his chin protruded, his head on one side, his keen eyes almost closed as he gazed lovingly at the black stallion through the curling rings of cigar-smoke. "The choicest bundle of horse-flesh mortal man ever clapped his two eyes on. Maybe not a marvel of beauty, strictly speaking, but he knows more, can do more, and do it in a little less time than the best of the best. Man may fail you, but he never. What you tell him, he'll do, whether it can be done or not, and you can't call on him too often. He can break the record from Alpha to Omega, and then set up a whole alphabet of his own, each day in the week, with a few extra touches to mark Sunday."

"Take one more look, then make me an offer."

Ellis shot a swift glance into the face of the speaker, but saw that now, at least, he was talking in sober earnest.

A remarkably handsome face it was, too; dark, sun-embrowned but of clear complexion and skin as smooth and marless as that of a woman, though a pair of silken mustaches shaded his upper lip. His eyes were large and very brilliant, shining blue as the vault of heaven above. His teeth were white and perfect, his lips red as blood, and a dimple marked the center of his square chin, relieving the sternness which otherwise that feature would have presented.

His dress was a mixture of West and East; part horse-jockey, part cowboy, rich in material, but bearing the signs of long and hard usage, hinting strongly at its wearer being "shoal on the bar."

That the weapons in the belt which tightly girded his round, muscular waist, were richly ornamented and of the finest workmanship, was no contradiction to this evidence of impecuniosity, for a man must be very far gone indeed, before he can bring himself to even think of "spouting" his tools, in the great West.

"Sorry, if you want to sell, but I have no use for him."

"That's a good enough reason when a common plug is offered," was the swift response, "but not in a case like this. Why, man, it's the one chance of a lifetime! People say you've got some good blood on your ranch, but when you come to get fairly acquainted with Wolf, yonder, you'll butcher every other horse on the place to sell for the hides and tallow, and save

a fortune in forage. You won't care for any other money-making machine. You'll pack your gripsack with a change of clothing, charter a bull-team to haul back the ducats he'll rake in for you, and when you grow weary of pulling down the big purses, leaving no dust for the rest save that which Wolf throws into their faces as he comes down the home stretch, you'll come back here and raise a monument to the memory of the man who made you a present of the King of the Turf!"

Ellis shook his head, with a short laugh.

"You're too generous by far, Mr. Knight. Why not go the circuit yourself, if there's so much money in the colt?"

"Haven't got the money to start in on—dead broke," was the frank response. "More than that: I'm too well known in the ring. Bless you, man! if you want to see a scattering of betting bloods, and a general buttoning-up of pockets, just whisper that C. F. B. Knight is in the field with a dark horse. No, no; it won't work, even if I had the ducats to start out with—which I haven't. Word would spread like wildfire, and not a horse would stay in, not a bet could you get, no matter what odds you might offer."

"That's all right. I'm not disputing your words. Your colt is a world-beater, no doubt; but it takes money to buy horse-feed, and I'm too far away from the big purses you hint about for them to dazzle either my eyes or my judgment."

"Which, boiled down, means that you don't believe Wolf is as good as I say?"

"That might be, and he still remain a marvel," retorted Ellis, with a grim laugh.

"Come: let's get down to hard-pan," said Knight, throwing away the stump of his cigarette, all traces of laziness vanishing as by magic. "That colt can show you a mile in fast time enough to open your eyes, just as he stands, though you are horseman enough to see that he is short of work. Take him as he stands; if he can show a mile in one-forty, will you give me my price?"

Frank Ellis laughed, a trace of derision in his voice.

"I might safely agree to do that, though you were to ask a whole national bank. Did you ever hold a watch on a horse?"

Nothing abashed by the sneer which lay beneath these words, Knight selected a cigar from a case and then extended it toward his companion.

"Smoke? They should taste good, for I gave my last dollar for them. But you was saying—oh, yes! Look here, pardner:

"You take me for one of those country-bred fossils who are ready to swear that they have seen—if not owned—plugs who could make their mile a minute, and who are as ignorant of stop-watches as they are of the transit of Venus; but there's where you're 'way off your nut. I was born in a manger, first washed in a horse bucket, had a sweating-cloth for a pinning-blanket, and learned to ride before I could stand alone. From water-boy, I took all the different degrees up to owning a racing-stable, and what I don't know about the capabilities of

either trotting or running-horses, is hardly worth the trouble of studying.

"I know that only one horse in all America—to leave out the right little, tight little island over the drink, where they know and care nothing about keeping the record, as we do over here—has ever clipped the forty-mark; and old Ten Broeck only cut a short quarter off of the even figure then. But he *did* it, and what I'm trying to get at is this:

"What horse-flesh *has* done, Wolf can do in his turn. If he can't show you a mile in one minute and forty seconds, or better, this very day, all out of shape as he is, I won't ask a cent for him. If he does make the time, you give me two thousand dollars, and then I'll go off and blow out my brains for being such an infernal idiot as to part with him at any price."

"Show me one-forty, and I'll double the price you ask," said Ellis, still thinking the fellow was bragging. "Yonder is a good mile track, where I exercise my own stock. It is in prime condition, and I'll provide horses to make the pace for you, if you want them."

"Which I don't—likewise your track," was the cool response. "I took a look at it as I came up. The turns are too sharp to suit Wolf, without his racing-plates on, or his first being accustomed to the course. Give me a straight stretch, and I'll show you the time to-day. If I have to make it over your track, I must have a week to settle the old fellow down to those turns."

"Are you in earnest?" demanded Ellis, with a keen look.

"As a boy popping the question for the first time!"

"All right. I'll have a straight mile measured off. If you are in earnest, that will be the shortest way of opening your eyes. If jesting, maybe the laughing will not be altogether one-sided."

Frank Ellis strode away toward the sheds of sod which answered for the quarters of his stockmen, and soon had them out with chains to measure off the course, Knight going with them to point out the direction he wanted the line run.

"Set up a couple of stakes, with rags on top, to mark the limit," he said, when the men were fairly at work.

"Of course you'll go along to see that the measurement is perfectly square," said Ellis.

"It's hardly worth while," was the careless reply. "I know you by reputation, and can trust to your honor. I can put in my time to better advantage warming Wolf up for the trial, for I warn you that I mean to make or break."

"Do it, and the cash is yours. Lively, lads!"

As Knight turned toward the ranch, his blue eyes glistened brightly as he beheld the trim figure of Lina Ellis standing in the doorway, curiosity imprinted on her countenance.

"You shall see what the telescopic horse can do, Miss Ellis," laughed Knight, as he drew near, doffing his hat and running one hand through the coal-black ringlets which clustered tightly around his well-shaped head. "If you like, you

can behold what mortal woman never yet saw, a horse cover a mile in less than one-forty."

"Not that animal on stilts?" smiled Lina.

"That very beauty! You laugh," himself following her example; "but you won't when you have once seen the old fellow fully extended. Then you'll be ready to swear he's an angel, even if he goes without wings. If you are true to your blood—if you are your father's daughter—you'll almost feel like going down on your knees and worshipping the animal you now laugh at, just as I have done more than once!"

"Yet you seem anxious to get rid of him!"

Instantly the face of the horse-trader grew grave, and there was a hard, metallic sound to his voice when he spoke:

"Because I must have money. More than life—more than love, even, depends on that! If not—if I could make good the oath I swore before Heaven without the money—I would far rather blow out my own brains where my eyes could see poor old Wolf with their last glance, than to part with him!"

He turned abruptly away from the wondering maiden, whom this sudden outburst had greatly astonished, and making a motion which brought the well-trained horse trotting to his side, he vaulted into the saddle with wonderful ease and grace, the face which he turned toward her being once more gay and careless, not a trace of that grim sternness being visible.

"Your father and his men are measuring a mile, and I must warm up Wolf up a little. Do us proud, and watch how we gain the right focus—ha! ha!"

Merrily his laugh rung out, as the stilt-like animal sprung into sudden life and action, curveting and prancing, leaping, darting from side to side after a fashion that would have thoroughly tested the skill of an Indian.

Swiftly wheeling he dashed straight at the high walls of the nearest corral, aiding the black by a dexterous use of the bridle just as it seemed as though they must be dashed with stunning force against the barrier. Into the air like a bird the stallion rose, clearing the fence without so much as brushing it with hoof or tail, alighting safely inside, only to make a semicircle and repeat the feat near the lower end.

"Can you see through the telescope more clearly now, Miss Ellis?" laughed Knight, a malicious twinkle in his large eyes as he swept around and drew rein before the maiden, gazing admiringly into the flushed countenance and glowing eyes.

"It is marvelous!" she exclaimed, coming forward and patting the proudly-arched neck. "I would never have believed it in the power of mortal horse to perform that feat. I begin to believe he is not so ugly after all."

"Thanks for both Wolf and myself," said Knight, with a low bow. "I have two failings, or two virtues according to the light in which you choose to view them. Next to a lovely woman I love a fine horse. Once—and not so long since—I swore that I would become the owner of the finest horse and the loveliest woman in the land. I kept one half my vow when I found Wolf, but now—Bah! what mat-

ter? One cannot have all one's wishes granted on this earth."

"If I owned such a horse I'd never part with him."

"Your father will own him before the sun sets," said Knight, with a hard laugh. "Unless I mistake, what is his is yours, if you want it to be so. But until then—off, Wolf, old fellow! Let's make the best of it while you are mine and I am yours! Away, old fellow, and shake the kinks out of your legs!"

With long, swift strides the black stallion obeyed, racing at speed around the ranch and corrals, Lina moving further out from the building in her eagerness to see more of this marvelous beast, her eyes glistening vividly as the mad rider came in sight again, riding direct toward her at full speed.

Straight on until it seemed as though she must be crushed to pomace beneath the thundering hoofs, a mocking smile lighting up the handsome face of the mad rider as he came closer and closer, the reins hanging free, the blue smoke escaping his red lips and floating in whirling eddies behind him—still on, until a fatal collision seemed inevitable.

Yet Lina did not flinch, did not seek safety in darting aside or turning in flight, though the warm flush died out of her cheeks, and a look almost of terror came into her eyes.

Then, just as another of those mighty, far-reaching strides would have crushed the maiden down to death, the black stallion stopped short, its hips almost touching the ground as its fore-feet braced back.

As though hurled from a catapult, the mad rider shot over his horse's head, alighting close in front of Lina on his feet, smiling mischievously as he doffed his hat and bowed low.

"You have good nerves, Miss Ellis, though I assure you, you were not in the slightest peril. Wolf admires a true lady, and would no more do her injury than he would go back on his master. I only thought I would show you another of his accomplishments, since you will soon become his mistress."

"It is one which I would hardly care to call into requisition," said Lina, with a faint smile.

"I declare!" said Knight, with a half-laugh and sheepish smile. "I never thought of that! With long skirts, it would be a rather awkward feat to perform, wouldn't it?"

There was something so genial in his tone, that Lina could not take offense at the speech, and she covered her slight confusion by again advancing to the horse and patting his satin coat.

"You are a true lover of a good horse, Miss Ellis," said Knight softly, joining her, "and Wolf knows it, too. There are precious few strangers he would suffer to take such liberties as he has you. To all others until now he has shown his teeth or heels. Oh! if it could only be! If I only could—"

"What?" asked Lina, startled by his sudden change of tone, but then shrinking back as she encountered his burning gaze.

"Perform the impossible," laughed Knight, once more the careless horse-trader. "I hardly know what has got into me to day, unless it is because I am about to part with you."

CHAPTER II.

CAPTAIN FLY-BY-NIGHT.

LINA ELLIS would have been something more or less than woman had not her curiosity been awakened by these abrupt and strongly contrasting changes of both tone and manner, and once again her gaze was turned inquiringly upon his face.

She fancied she could read a deep-seated trouble in that handsome face and down in those lustrous blue eyes, and, woman-like, she longed to relieve it.

"It wounds your heart to even think of parting with your good horse?" she said softly, one little hand touching his arm.

"Well, it might be a little easier. But you remember the old saying: 'Needs must when the devil drives!'"

"You sell him because you need the money?"

Knight nodded, gazing furtively into the eager eyes. He could not understand what she was driving at, try his best.

"If the money could be raised in some other fashion, you would not think of sacrificing him?"

"I'd sooner strike off my right hand at the wrist than part with the old fellow!" muttered Knight, his eyes glowing, as he flung one arm around the arched neck of the black stallion and pressed his lips to the dewy muzzle, tenderly as though it were the lips of his betrothed bride.

"You shall not part with him then," said Lina, her voice trembling, her eyes growing misty as she looked on the couple.

Knight turned abruptly, his eyes wide open, staring at her as though doubting the evidence of his ears. Then he laughed shortly, hardly, flinging out one hand.

"You forget. I said I *must* have the money!"

"So you shall. Father will lend it to you. You shall keep your horse. It would be a in to separate those who love so truly."

"But you forget, Miss Ellis; I am a stranger to both you and your father. I can offer no security for the money. I have only Wolf to pledge. You are very kind, but I fear too impulsive. Your generous heart runs away with you. No! no! the poor old fellow must go!"

"And I say not, unless you really prefer to part with him," said Lina, decidedly. "You are a stranger, yes; we know nothing more of you than what you have chosen to tell us, it is true; but a man who can love a horse as fervently as you love yours cannot be other than an honest man. That shall be security for the money loaned."

The man turned his head away, as though to conceal his emotions, but it was only for a brief space. With a swift motion, he dropped on one knee at her feet, bowing his head and touching the hem of her dress to his lips, before she could divine his purpose.

"A thousand thanks, lady!" he muttered, tears seeming to dim the brilliancy of his eyes as he raised them toward her suffused countenance. "I feel your generosity most deeply, even while I feel compelled to reject your offer. True, I am a poor devil, without money enough to buy a crust of bread, without friends or

kindred to care what becomes of me; but I have not yet fallen so low as to accept alms from strangers. And yet," with a longing look toward the black stallion as he rose to his feet, "if your father *would* lend the money, taking Wolf as security, giving me a decent time for redeeming the old fellow, I'd—"

"He will—he shall!" impulsively cried Lina. "I will call him back."

The shapely hand of Knight fell upon her arm as she started toward the house, and he hastily uttered:

"One more favor, lady! I have yielded my manhood, my independence, rather than deny what you seemed to have set your heart on bringing about, though I feel sure your father will refuse to ratify your pledge. I could hardly bear to hear his words of refusal. It is but a short distance to where he now stands. Will you honor Black Wolf so far?"

As he spoke, he made a gesture that brought the stallion to their side. The sagacious animal dropped to his knees and swayed his back lowly, when Knight, without waiting for a reply, caught Lina beneath the arms, and deftly placed her in the saddle, before she fairly comprehended his purpose.

Nimble as a cat, Black Wolf rose to his feet, and with an agile bound, the stranger leaped up behind the saddle, flinging one arm around the waist of the astonished maiden.

A little cry escaped her lips, more of surprise than of alarm, for as yet she did not realize the peril that threatened her from this smooth-spoken stranger who had played his part so adroitly.

"What does this mean? How dare you!" she exclaimed, trying to free herself, only to feel the grip grow tighter as, with adroit strength, he raised her from the saddle and shifted himself into it.

"Cool and easy, my little lady-bird!" laughed the fellow, as he rested her form across his thighs, one arm pinning both of hers to her sides, and holding her helpless. "It means just this: the prologue has ended, and now the real business of this little drama begins."

"Release me!" panted Lina, striving to free herself, but all in vain. "You shall suffer for this insult!"

"A man could afford to pay a big price for the privilege of so closely embracing such a dainty morsel of flesh and blood," laughed Knight, bending his head and pressing her lips with his own.

Until then, Lina Ellis had not realized that she was actually in danger. If she thought at all, it was that this man intended riding with her to where Frank Ellis stood watching his men planting the stakes which marked the end of the mile course; but that deception faded away as Knight turned his horse's head away from where her father stood, and Wolf broke into a swift gallop.

A shrill scream broke from her lips, but Knight made no effort to prevent its repetition, laughing heartily as he said:

"Pipe on, lady bird! I care not how soon you pull the wool from over your daddy's eyes, and rouse him from his fond dreams of soon

owning a world-beater in my good old Wolf. Ha! ha! the mole-eyed fool! To think that I would part with such a treasure for his gold!"

The maiden shuddered at his wild laugh, and her blood grew cold within her veins, for she began to believe she had fallen into the power of a madman.

With a desperate effort, she subdued her terror sufficiently to enable her to speak:

"What do you mean? You are simply trying to scare me, but you are wasting your time, and angering my friends for nothing. Put me down, instantly, else you shall suffer for it!"

"What do I mean?" mockingly repeated Knight. "Your father called Black Wolf a cock-tail, and doubted both his speed and stamina. I am going to show him what he possesses of each of those qualities. I'll show him that not one of all his brag stock can catch Wolf with a double burden on his back—that I was not idly boasting, when I said that in this glossy black hide is wrapped up a world-beater!"

Again and louder than before the maiden shrieked aloud for help, and with a taunting laugh the mad rider reined in his steed, wheeled and faced in the direction of the ranchero, whose ears had caught that wild appeal for aid, and who was staring wildly toward the doubly burdened horse, as yet unable to comprehend what had occurred.

Knight raised the light form of the maiden in his arms above the head of the black horse and then shouted aloud, his voice crossing the mile of plain like the note of a trumpet:

"Take a last look at your daughter as a maiden. When you see her again she will be a wedded wife—the wife of Captain Fly-by-Night!"

A hoarse, mad cry broke from the pale lips of the ranchero as he caught the mocking words, and then he dashed at full speed toward the spot, closely followed by his men.

Captain Fly-by-Night lowered his captive to the saddle before him, waved one hand in taunting defiance, then touched Black Wolf with the sharp spurs, darting away over the level plain with the rapidity of a swallow on the wing.

A gasping moan escaped the maiden, now pale as a corpse, for at the mention of that name she realized her frightful peril as she had never before. Her brain seemed whirling in a mad dance, and her breath failed her, though she did not swoon outright.

Little wonder if she had lost all consciousness through sheer terror at finding herself helpless in the power of this demon incarnate. If common report was to be believed, a more merciless villain never disgraced the footstool.

Captain Fly-by-Night, as he called himself—and no man could say with certainty what his rightful name was—had leaped into most disagreeable prominence at a bound, proving himself a king of daring horse-thieves, who was not to be driven from the prey on which he set his eyes and wishes by the dread of bloodshed. From the very first blow he struck his career had been crowned with perfect success. Not a single failure, great or small, was recorded

against his name, and he was rapidly becoming the scourge of the stock-raising country at the date when this record opens.

As yet, he had not troubled the Ellis ranch, though it offered unusual inducements in the shape of fine stock, though all save the sturdy owner predicted that it was only a matter of time when his power would make itself felt. But not one among the disaster-predicting croakers had imagined the infamous horse-thief would strike such an audacious blow as this.

Least of all did Frank Ellis dream of such a thing.

When his idolized wife died, shortly after the Civil War ended, leaving him Lina as the sole pledge of their affections, the ex-colonel soon wearied of life in the crowded city, and placing Lina at school, he struck out for the Great West, passing years in wandering about, vaguely seeking a home.

Always a passionate lover of fine stock, especially of horses, when his choice was finally made, it took the shape of a breeding-ranch on a limited scale at first, since he was not over-rich, and was determined to steer clear of the common breeds, of either the States or the plains ponies.

He had the field almost wholly to himself, and steadily made money, gradually increasing his "plant" until it became the most valuable property of the sort in all Colorado.

When Lina graduated, he gave her her choice, to remain in town, or share his life on the ranch. She elected to join him, and not once had either of them regretted the decision.

With a desperate effort, Lina conquered the faintness which assailed her, and though her face was pale as that of a corpse as she gazed up into the face of the villain who held her so tightly clasped to his breast, her voice was firm and unquavering as she spoke:

"If it is for money you have stolen me away, name your price, and I promise you that it shall be paid to you the moment you set me at liberty and I can reach my father."

"Bah! do you take me for a fool?" sneered Captain Fly-by-Night. "You may believe what you say, but all the same it's a lie. Frank Ellis would pay me the debt in lead or cold steel willingly enough, but never in gold or greenbacks. Besides, I am not so anxious to get rid of you, lady-bird! I did not carry you away for gold. Have you forgotten the hint I gave you of the oath I once took? I have the best horse in the world, and I'm open to bet big money that I've got the loveliest woman in the State, too!"

"Not yet!" gasped Lina, making a desperate effort to cast herself to the ground, though she knew that a fall from that height while the black stallion was racing so swiftly, could scarcely be other than fatal to life or limb.

So vigorous was her struggle, and coming so unexpectedly, that Captain Fly-by-Night almost lost his hold on her person, only recovering it by wonderful quickness and strength.

A panting cry of angry chagrin broke from the lips of the maiden as she saw how vain were her efforts, but at that instant one of her hands struck against the ivory haft of the long-bladed knife which hung against the hip of her

captor, and in the extremity of her peril, she clutched it and jerked the weapon from its sheath. For the moment her natural horror of death and bloodshed was forgotten, and she made a desperate effort to plunge the keen steel into the side of the laughing villain.

Only to be again foiled.

Captain Fly-by-Night felt the withdrawal of the weapon, and dropping the bridle-reins, he caught her wrist and held it helpless before the blade could be driven home.

"Go easy, lady-bird!" he cried, mockingly, as he deftly shifted his grasp to the back of the blade, then wresting it from her benumbed hand and replacing it in its scabbard, which he pushed around his waist until it rested beyond her reach. "If it's all the same to you, I prefer not to hop the twig just at present. And you—surely you would not cheat the hangman of his just dues?"

A convulsive sob burst from the panting bosom of the poor girl, as she realized how utterly helpless she was in the clutches of this steel-nerved villain. Yet she made one last appeal to him, though she knew it would avail nothing.

"Are you all villain? Is there not one single gleam of manliness in your composition? Have you no sense of gratitude? Are you *all* bad—all demon, as men say?"

"The worst pill in the box, I reckon," laughed the other.

"We have never injured you, neither father nor me. On the contrary, when I believed you a poor man, I was more than willing to aid you as far as lay in my power. I would have urged father to let you have the money you wanted, without taking from you the horse you pretended to love so tenderly. Even now, if you will set me down, I will stop them from pursuing you, or from punishing you in any way for this outrage."

All this time, Black Wolf was speeding along over the plain at a pace that was little short of the marvelous, while Frank Ellis and his men were racing at top speed for the corrals in which their horses were confined.

As Lina poured out her appeal, Captain Fly-by-Night cast a keen glance over his shoulder to note the progress of the rancho, then looked ahead of Black Wolf. At a short distance ahead, there rose a long, gently sloping swell or ridge of ground, running at right angles across the course they were pursuing, and for the first time since starting away with his captive, Captain Fly-by-Night touched the black stallion with the spur.

Swift as the flight of a wild pigeon, the long-legged horse flew forward, rising the swell, to be checked when the extreme summit was gained. At a touch of the rein, he wheeled around and faced the distant ranch, just as the owner and his men gained the bars of the corral.

"I don't doubt you mean all you say, little lady-bird," said the outlaw, speaking more gravely than before. "But whether you could make that pledge good, is another thing. Frank Ellis is tough-mouthed, when once his blood is stirred up, and it would be like choking off a bull-dog. You *might* do it, but I don't want

you to. I counted on his following me, and if I don't lead him a merry dance before all's over, Black Wolf is a worse cock-tail even than he thought him at first!

"As for you, lady-bird, don't borrow trouble. I hold no grudge against you, and if you are sensible, no particular harm shall come to you while in my charge. I only want to prove to the old gent, that Black Wolf has both speed and bottom."

Once more Lina sought to wrest herself free, struggling so frantically that at length Captain Fly-by-Night grew angry and spoke with stern sharpness:

"Enough of this tomfoolery! Give me your word to act a little less like a frightened wild-cat, or I'll not only tie your hands, but I'll put a gag between those pretty lips as well. Can you understand that, lady-bird?"

Worn out with the unavailing struggle, Lina lay panting in his arms, helpless as a child, tears of pain and bitter anger trickling down her flushed cheeks.

At that moment the rancho and his men spurred out from the corral, and came thundering at breakneck speed across the plain toward the daring kidnapper, whose figure was clearly outlined against the sky beyond.

Captain Fly-by-Night lifted his hat, and swung it above his head, his voice ringing out in a shrill, high-pitched tone that carried it across the intervening space.

With a motion of his hat in the direction he intended resuming his flight, he wheeled and dashed at full speed down the opposite side of the slope, heading for the distant hills.

On at a marvelous rate of speed dashed the black steed, fully justifying the confidence of its master, for when the agonized father and his men appeared on the swell, it was clear to be seen that they had not gained, even if they had not lost ground, doubly laden though Black Wolf was.

On, swift as the tireless swallow he sped, stretching out like a greyhound at speed, those long legs moving back and forth with the power and regularity of some magnificent machine, so rapidly that the human eye could scarce distinguish them. On, without faltering, without flagging, without the glossy sides feeling the keen-pointed rowels. And mockingly the mad rider laughed as he waved his hand in defiance toward his pursuers, who thirsted for his life-blood.

Still on, though more than an hour had elapsed since the avengers had spurred out from the corral; on, though another hour stole by, and the sun crept down toward the western horizon; on with unabated speed ran the black wonder, until the once distant hills grew nearer and more distinct.

Directly ahead lay a gully, the sloping mouth being hidden by tall grass until the black horse was almost upon it. A touch of the rein turned him aside, just as Lina cried:

"*Help! for the love of heaven save me!*"

CHAPTER III.

A WILD FROLIC.

"AND this is a fair specimen of the mighty monsters you vowed could chaw up a score of

our little striped kittens at a single mouthful, and then sit back on their haunches and weep because we had nothing fit to give them common exercise, is it, cousin Burt? A cowardly brute that hunts its hole at the first yelp, and can only be driven out by the use of spitting devils; if at all! Go 'way with your grizzlies!"

"That's all right, Mr. Furguson. Tenderfeet are privileged, and we never bear in mind what they spout. We're just getting you used to it, little by jerks, and after you have met a few cubs, we'll turn out a genuine specimen of Old Eph for you to admire and compare with your beloved tigers."

Three young men—in almost any other country they might have answered to the appellation of lads—were grouped in a pocket which lay near the southeastern extremity of a short range of hills, scarcely high or extensive enough to merit the title of mountains, though such was the term given them by the cattle-ranchers whose ranges lay to the southeast.

One of those stock farms belonged to the Applebee family which consisted of father, son and two nephews, the three latter now demanding a share of the reader's attention.

At the death of their father, Lancelot and Burtis Applebee, in accordance with his dying commands, left their cattle-ranch in trustworthy hands, and started for India, where, in the independent kingdom of Nepaul, lying on the southern slope of the Himalayas, their uncle, Charles Applebee, possessed an extensive indigo plantation.

The two brothers, Charles and Henry, had been separated thus widely by the force of circumstances which neither of them could control, but which need not be entered on just now, but the love which rendered them remarkable in early days, never waned as they waxed older, and as they begun the battle of life as equal partners, so they were when the elder brother was called home by the touch of death.

While on his death-bed, and repeating the wish in his will, Henry Applebee bade his two sons seek out their uncle, and spend one year in carefully studying the indigo business. If they could content themselves with it, they were to sell out the stock farm, and unite with their uncle. If not, and they could not prevail on Charles Applebee to dispose of his interests in Nepaul and return with them to Colorado for good and all, they were at liberty to use their own judgment as to their future course in life.

The brothers faithfully carried out the dying instructions of their parent, but when the year of probation came to an end, it was Charles Applebee and his son Percy who sold out, all returning to Colorado to live.

At this time of the year, it was a slack season at the cattle-ranch. The stock had all been rounded up, the calves marked and branded, a few drafts made to fill outstanding orders for beeves, and it was still too early for the annual "drive" to begin.

Since their arrival at the ranch, the boys had been too busy for much indulgence in hunting, of which they were all passionately fond, though they had several expeditions in view,

and work enough cut out to last them for two years to come.

But when word was brought in by one of their herders of a huge grizzly bear which seemed to have wandered from the northern ranges, to take up his abode in the hills which lay a little less than a day's ride from the cattle-ranch, the lads resolved to win his claws, before any other party got in ahead of them.

Thanks to the rough and tangled nature of the ground where the discovery was first made, following the trail was a matter of no little difficulty, but both Lance and Burt were no mean scouts, and at the end of a couple of hours, they found where the grizzly had taken refuge in a small cave, or rather cleft in the rocks, at the upper extremity of a good-sized "pocket," or walled-in valley, near the edge of the plain.

Dismounting, but holding the long bridle-reins over one arm, Burt cast several stones into the crooked opening through which they felt morally certain the bear had retreated, but the only result was that of drawing forth a sullen growl, Old Eph clearly not being in a fighting humor just then.

"Out he comes, if I have to go in after him and tug him out by the tail!" declared Burt, not a little chagrined at this tame outcome to his enthusiastic picture drawn for the benefit of his cousin.

And there is little doubt but what he would have kept his word, had not Lance interfered promptly.

"There's more ways than one to skin a cat, boy Burt, and though you wouldn't be much loss, philosophically considered, we'll try less heroic measures first. If Old Eph won't come out of his own accord, we'll send in a spitting-devil after him."

"Good enough!" cried Burt, laughing gleefully. "I never thought of that. Score one for you, old Sobersides!"

There was no need of Lance's being more explicit. Like all boys who have had much to do with powder, both Burt and Percy knew right well what was meant by "spitting-devil," and all about their manufacture and uses to which they could be put.

Withdrawing a little further from the refuge in which Bruin lay sulking, the three lads busied themselves in preparing the rude fireworks. A few many-spined thorns cut from the trunk of a honey-locust tree which stood near the center of the miniature valley, formed the foundation of the spitting-devils. Around the sharp points a wisp of dry grass was wrapped and securely tied, then wet with water from their canteens. Over this, powder was liberally sprinkled, the hot sun quickly baking it into a rough cake.

"Get all ready now, and we'll open the ball," said Lance, as the fireworks were pronounced fit for use. "Percy, you must keep clear this time, and let us do the work. A mistake might end in the death of one or all of us, and you know we can handle the ropes a trifle more accurately than you can."

"Oh, I'm not going to spoil sport—such as it is," with a shrug of his shoulders. "After ele-

phant and tiger-shooting, this worrying a little frightened cur is tame sport. Still, I don't mind looking on, if you see any fun in it. If I fall asleep before you get through, 'wake me up when Kirby dies.'"

"Durned if I see the sense of a man's making a condemned idiot of himself!" growled Burt, disgustedly.

"Neither did I, when I had the pleasure of first meeting you in Nepaul, cousin Burt," laughed Percy. "But I'll hold my whist for the present. Go on with your rat-killing, gentlemen."

First looking well to their saddles and girths, making sure that their weapons were in good order and the coils of their lassoes running free, the brothers took up their positions on horseback, their snorting, trembling animals being carefully blinded by means of heavy silk handkerchiefs.

Lance stood to one side of the crevice into which the grizzly had retreated, while Burt rode up squarely in front, the bridle-reins over one arm, holding the spitting-devils in that hand, while he struck a match with the other.

Instantly the protruding strands of dry grass caught fire from the match, igniting the powder, which made a mighty fizzing, throwing out sparks on all sides as Burt hastily tossed them, one after the other, into the cave, then wheeled his horse, glancing back over his shoulder as a tremendous growling and snarling came from the retreat of the grizzled brute.

A moment or two of breathless suspense, then, with a loud roar of angry pain, a shaggy mass shot out of the cave, ablaze with fire, rolling rapidly over and over as it got clear of the entrance.

One of the spitting-devils had caught on one shoulder of the huge brute, and its frantic tumblings only served to drive the keen thorns deeper into the hide, while all its rollings failed to extinguish the sputtering powder.

With a savage roar, the bear snapped at the firework, tearing it loose from the burning wool, but only making matters worse as it sought to crush the thing of torture. The thorns, tough and hard almost as iron, penetrated the roof of the brute's mouth and its tongue, while the scorching sparks choked it severely.

Rearing on its haunches, the maddened brute tore at the ball of fire with its fore-paws, howling, snarling, roaring and gnashing its teeth as it staggered to and fro like a drunken man. And the three lads, looking on at the ludicrous scene, could not refrain from bursting into wild peals of laughter.

The bear either heard this, or else caught sight of Lance on his trembling horse, as the spitting-devil was torn out of its mouth, for with a terrible roar, it plunged toward him.

But Burt was on the alert, and with a swift cast of his coiled lasso, sent its loop with an unerring aim around the thick neck of the infuriated beast, then reining back his well-trained horse, fairly raising the grizzly to its hind feet and almost throwing it backward with the heavy shock.

Active as a cat, the bear whirled around, and charged its assailant open-mouthed, thus giving

Lance the precise opportunity for which he was waiting and watching.

Instantly his lasso shot through the air and closed about one hind leg, just above the joint, and as the horse bounded back, the grizzly was stretched out flat on its belly.

But only for an instant. Then, with a frightful roar, the beast scrambled to its feet, and though Lance put all the strain on his lasso that lay in his power, the grizzly stood up on three feet, grasping the lasso which connected him with Burt, dragging it in hand over hand, so to speak, despite the stoutly braced feet of the mustang.

"Cut the rope, if you can't hold your own, Burt!" cried Lance, excitedly, as he began to realize the danger which menaced his brother.

"I will if I do, but if I do, I'll be durned if I do!" snorted the daring youngster, pricking his horse a few feet forward, then making it leap swiftly to one side, hoping to overthrow the bear.

His effort was not only unsuccessful, but the grizzly managed to secure a part of the slack rope before the strain was again applied, showing its bleeding mouth and gleaming teeth, as though grinning at the prospect of speedy revenge.

All this passed with the rapidity almost of thought, and until now Percy Applebee did not realize the full extent of the peril that threatened his cousin. When he did, however, he cut little time to waste, swinging the lariat around his head as he spurred his horse closer, casting the noose around the thick throat of the brute with all the skill of a practiced *vaquero*, and then reining back his animal, throwing a side strain on the bear that even its enormous strength could not successfully resist.

With a shock that drew a sullen grunt from its lungs, Old Eph fell over on its side, and Burt spurred his horse so quickly that the lasso was once more stretched at full length.

"Don't give him a chance!" cried Lance. "Keep up the strain, and work him over to that tree!"

Right thoroughly were his instructions obeyed, though the maddened brute fought desperately. But the choking of the two loops about his throat were gradually sapping his powers, marvelous though they were, and little by little the reckless riders worked him toward the locust tree, checking his rushes whenever they were made in the contrary direction, but giving him slack as he turned in the one they desired.

Lance's horse shook the blinding handkerchief from over its eyes, and then its terror of the huge beast made it unmanageable, dexterous though its master was.

"Cast off, or the fool-brute will cripple itself!" cried out Burt, sharply. "Percy and I can manage the old fellow now. Shake your rope loose, man alive—don't you hear?"

Though loth enough, Lance saw that this was the only course left him, and by dint of brisk spurring, he contrived to slacken his lasso sufficiently to shake it off from the leg of the bear, then his frightened horse dashed away with him to the mouth of the pocket at break neck speed.

"Now we've got him!" yelled Burt, as the

grizzly made a savage rush that carried him close up to the tree. "Circle around, old fellow! That's the ticket!"

Percy saw plainly enough what was wanted, and right gallantly he met the views of his cousin. They spurred their horses toward each other, so as to bring their ropes around the locust tree, with the bear struggling on the opposite side. Burt gathered in a little rope, and as he neared his cousin, he lifted his horse and leaped it over the other lasso, then sped on in a circle to repeat the performance.

The bear was drawn up close to the trunk, the second and third turns of the lassoes passing around his body, holding him well-nigh helpless.

By this time, Lance had mastered his horse and replaced the blind, returning to the scene, just as Percy checked his steed by Burt, and leaped to the ground.

"You can hold my nag. I want to take a closer look at your monster, before we rub him out."

"Take care!" cried Lance, warningly, as he saw the movement of the young man. "Don't go too close—"

Percy laughed carelessly as he unslung his Winchester from where it had rested across his shoulder during all.

"If he was free, I wouldn't fear him with this little tool in my hands," he said, running around to the other side of the tree and facing the struggling brute.

A warning cry from Burt, as his horse stumbled and the lasso seemed to strangely slacken. And at the same moment Percy made a truly startling discovery.

The grizzly had managed to catch the ropes in his mouth, and severing the loops, was now at liberty!

Roaring furiously, he plunged straight at the youth!

CHAPTER IV.

PLAYING A BOLD GAME.

AS though conjured up from the bowels of the earth by that agonized cry for help, an armed and mounted man dashed out of the narrow mouth of the gully, less than twoscore yards from Captain Fly-by-Night and his fair captive.

His surprise seemed to the full as complete as was that of the outlaw-chief, for he jerked up his horse with a jaw-breaking grip, uttering a wondering exclamation as he stared at the doubly-laden black horse before him.

"Help, Wycherly!" cried Lina, trying to tear herself from that steel-like grip. "Save me from this demon!"

"Lord above! it's Miss Lina!" gasped the cowboy, scarce able to realize the truth even then, though his hand dropped to the Winchester rifle which lay across his thighs, held in place by a double loop of elk-hide secured to the high pommel of the saddle.

At the appearance of the stranger, Captain Fly-by-Night abruptly wrenched up Black Wolf, almost facing the mouth of the gully, and only the vigorous struggle of his captive kept the cowboy from meeting with instant death at his hands. The outlaw felt sure the fellow would

attempt to rescue the maiden, even before she made her second appeal, and as his eagle eye saw the movement toward the repeater, he acted promptly.

Shifting his grasp, he flung his left arm around the form of the maiden, turning and holding her up before his own body in such a manner as made it a risky matter to venture a shot, through fear of striking the wrong mark, holding a cocked revolver close to her head as he cried out sharply:

"Fingers empty and hands up, old boss! Touch a weapon, and I'll scatter the contents of this dainty head all over the prairie! Hands up, I tell you!"

For a moment the cowboy hesitated, his bronzed face the battle-ground of rage, mortification, and fear; not for himself, but for the daughter of his employer.

"For the last time, drop that tool and hoist your hooks!" thundered Captain Fly-by-Night, his blue eyes glittering like those of an enraged serpent as he glared over the shoulder of his fair safeguard.

"Defy him!" cried Lina, desperately striving to free herself. "He dare not fire—I'd rather meet death now than to remain in his power. If you are a man, help me, Wycherly!"

"If you are an infernal fool you'll make the attempt, Wycherly!" sneered Captain Fly-by-Night. "I give you ten seconds in which to elevate your paws. At the end of that time I'll blow her brains out, sure as yonder sun is shining on us three at this instant! Ten seconds—you understand?"

If not in deadly earnest his tones were an admirable counterfeit, and the cowboy was conquered by his fear for the young woman, in defense of whom he would have given his own life without a second thought or the slightest hesitation.

"It's for *your* sake, Miss Lina!" he huskily muttered, as he dropped his grasp on the repeater and raised his hands a trifle. "It's only for *her* sake, durn ye fer a cussed dog!"

"Hands up, I say, dog!" growled Captain Fly-by-Night.

"I'll git even with ye fer this some time, durn ye!" the cowboy snarled, showing his teeth savagely as he obeyed the stern command and elevated both hands at full length above his head.

"None o' your back talking, my fine fellow. Clasp your hands together and mind—at the first sign of crookedness on your part, there'll be a couple of dead people right in this neighborhood. So—how do you like it, my game chicken?"

Though obedience was an intensely bitter pill, the cowboy in his fear of worse befalling the daughter of his employer, clasped his hands above his head as directed. At a touch of the spur, Black Wolf strode along a few paces, then halted at another signal as the two wrists of the cowboy appeared as a single one, when viewed from where the outlaw sat.

Swift as thought Captain Fly-by-Night turned his revolver from the temple of Lina Ellis toward the *vaquero*, discharging the weapon seemingly without pausing for an aim, but the hissing lead sped true to its mark and

crashed its way through both wrists of the luckless cowboy, crippling him completely.

A cry of intense agony burst from his lips as his bloody hands dropped before him—agony that was not all bodily, for he knew that he was ruined for life.

With a mocking laugh Captain Fly-by-Night lowered Lina to his left arm, holding her to his side with a merciless grip—that threatened to crush in her ribs, rendering her incapable of any further attempt at escape just then.

A swaying of his body veered Black Wolf around, and a few swift strides carried him close to the cowboy.

"Down on your marrowbones, dog, and give thanks for my sparing your life!" cried Captain Fly-by-Night, as he leaned forward in the saddle and struck savagely at the bowed head of the crippled man with clubbed pistol.

Without a cry or groan, the luckless wretch flung up his blood dripping hands, reeled for an instant, then fell sideways from the saddle to the earth, while his mustang, snorting loudly with terror, dashed away at full speed.

Without a second glance toward either man or animal, the outlaw chief gave Black Wolf the word, and thundered away at full speed, knowing that this delay, brief though it had been in point of time, had given his pursuers a fearful advantage. There was no longer a smile on his face, as he looked down into the pallid countenance of Lina Ellis, and his voice was harsh and unmusical as he spoke:

"You see what your infernal nonsense has wrought? Take it to heart, and don't forget the lesson in a hurry, or worse may befall you, little spitfire! I can stand a good deal from one in petticoats, but even my good nature has its limits."

There was no reply. Poor Lina, worn out by her desperate struggles for freedom, by the mental torture she had been forced to undergo since the cunning horse-trader had first cast aside his mask and shown himself in his true colors; the breath almost crushed out of her body by that merciless grip, had yielded to unconsciousness as she saw the man on whom she had depended for rescue, shot down like a mad dog.

"So much the better!" muttered the outlaw, as he saw that her senses had fled. "I never tackled a more obstinate bit of dry-goods in all my life! If I was playing for beauty alone, curse me if I wouldn't tossed her over my shoulder, long ago, as more bother than she's worth!"

On like an arrow fresh loosed from the bow, sped the wonderful black stallion, now rapidly nearing the hills on which the chief of horse-thieves had set his eyes from the outset. On without failing or faltering, without showing sign of fatigue, running as smooth and free as when that mad ride had first begun. On, though more than forty miles had been covered with that double weight upon his back.

Little marvel that Captain Fly-by-Night was proud of the long-legged wonder!

Straight on without drawing rein or flagging until the edge of the broken ground was gained. Among the scattered boulders and huge crags

the outlaw wound his way at a rapid trot, like one thoroughly familiar with his surroundings, steadily making his way higher and higher, until at length he drew rein, and with the limp figure of the unconscious maiden still clasped to his breast, leaped from the saddle to the ground.

"Make the most of your time, old fellow!" he said, as he lowered his captive against a sloping rock, and then slipped the bits from the mouth of the black stallion. "Fill your belly while you can, for it may be that we'll have to pick up hoofs again in a hurry. That old soldier is a stubborn cuss, and may not choose to accept my terms. He won't, if he can see a single chance to get even at any cheaper price, that's sure and certain!"

With a soft whicker, the animal touched its fawn-colored muzzle to the cheek of its master, who returned the caress, then motioned his hand toward the rich grass which grew a few rods to the left, near where a small spring bubbled forth from beneath a moss-grown rock.

Nothing loth, Black Wolf turned off in that direction, and fell to greedily cropping the grass, while Captain Fly-by-Night stooped and lifted the unconscious girl in his arms, bearing her toward a high point of rocks which overlooked the plain across which their mad race had carried them.

Halting here, he again lowered the maiden to a comfortable position, then gazed out over the level ground which stretched before him for miles and miles, unbroken by tree or shrub, unmarked by aught of life save in one point. There, a little cloud of dust rose on the air, marking where Frank Ellis and his men were spurring along the trail of the daring kidnapper, pressing on at the highest rate of speed they could extort from their jaded animals, stern and dogged, though the least observing among them all could not fail to see that instead of the trail's growing any fresher, they were being distanced with every leap taken by the equine wonder which carried the prince of horse-thieves and the fair daughter of the ranchero.

"Good enough horses, as the common stock runs," said the outlaw, seating himself on a rock and taking a cigar from his beaded case, biting off the tip as he critically eyed the oncoming force beyond. "But not a tit on a hog, in comparison with old Wolf, yonder—bless his hide and tallow! I begin to think Wasson depended more on common rumor than his own judgment, in taking stock, this time."

"Well, I've entered the lists, and I'll make or break!"

Lighting his cigar, he turned to where the senseless maiden lay, and producing a brandy-flask from an inner pocket, he proceeded to bathe her temples, and pour a few drops of the powerful liquor into her mouth.

This quickly produced the desired effect, and with a gasping sigh, Lina opened her eyes, staring around her in bewilderment. Only for a brief space, however. Then she recognized the face of the man bending over her, and shrinking back, she uttered a low cry of intense aversion as she strove to arise and flee.

But his strong grasp was fastened upon her shoulder, and holding her helpless, he spoke hurriedly:

"There's no time to waste in folly, my dear girl. I tell you once more, I mean you no harm, if you only show half sense. Still, I've set out to win a big stake, through you, and if your blind folly endangers my little game, you may suffer the consequences. You see, I do not mince my words."

"How have I ever injured you?" she faltered.

"You never have," was the prompt reply.

"On the contrary, I never met a more charming creature, or one whom I would more deeply regret causing even a moment's pain, either in body or mentally. If our meeting had taken place before I set out to play this part, I would far rather have played another—that of a devoted lover, who—"

The speech was cut short by a stinging slap across the smiling lips from the little hand of the insulted maiden, who sprung to her feet, her eyes ablaze with anger at his daring.

Captain Fly-by-Night started back, with a hissing curse, and once more Lina tried to escape by flight, only to find herself foiled by the cat-like activity of the outlaw.

"No, no, my dainty spitfire!" he laughed, checking her blind flight. "I can't part with you so soon. I'll never part with you until I have broken you of all such ugly tricks, if you stir me up much more."

Panting, breathless, the poor girl ceased her vain struggles, bursting into a flood of tears.

"That's more like lovely woman," said Captain Fly-by-Night, mockingly. "When the dew begins to fall, she's coming to her reason. If I only had a little spare time, I dare say I could tame you quite to my notion. As it is—oblige me by taking a look over in this direction for a moment."

With gentle force, he led, almost carried, the girl to the point of rocks, and supporting her on her feet, stretched out his free hand toward the rapidly approaching horsemen.

Through her blinding tears, Lina caught a glimpse of them, and dashing away the mist, she gazed eagerly at them, a glad cry escaping her lips as she recognized her father in the leading horseman.

"Am I all the demon you have pictured me?" mockingly demanded the outlaw, laughing softly. "If I were, would I be standing quietly here, in full view of those mad riders, your friends, instead of bearing you further away?"

"You have set a trap for them!" cried Lina, turning pale as death, casting an apprehensive glance around her, as this terrible suspicion flashed across her brain.

Acting on the thought, she shrieked aloud, waving her hands excitedly as she saw her father look toward them, then plunge his spurs rowel deep into the steaming flanks of his foam-covered horse.

"If I have, you have insured their running headlong into it," sneered the horse-thief, with a hard laugh. "Little short of a cyclone could turn your father back now!"

But Lina did not appear to have heard his mocking words.

Her burning gaze was riveted on the figure of her father, as he dashed swiftly on at the head of his cheering men, who shook their weapons menacingly toward the outlaw, who stood boldly out in full view, as though careless of their rage.

"Devil!" hoarsely shouted Frank Ellis, his voice coming faintly to their ears. "Harm her not! Dare to injure one hair of her head, and I'll torture you from now till doomsday!"

"First catch your hare!" laughed Captain Fly-by-Night, as his left arm tightened around the waist of his fair captive, drawing her still closer to the end of the rock point, where they could look down two hundred feet to the boulder-strewn base of the crag.

Frank Ellis, almost distracted by the peril which he felt was threatening his idolized child, still spurred on, still uttered strangely-mingled prayers and threats; but not a word in response came from the lips of the outlaw chief, until the rescuers were fairly within rifle range and he saw some of the cowboys unslinging their guns. Then he waved his right hand commandingly, crying out in sharp, decisive tones:

"Halt! every mother's son of you, or by the heavens above us, I'll hurl this dainty morsel down by the shortest route!"

As he spoke, he caught Lina up in his strong hands, and held her suspended above the fearful height, as though about to put his savage threat into execution that instant.

An agonized cry from Frank Ellis caused all of his men to promptly follow his example in reining in his panting steed, and a taunting laugh came to their ears from the lips of the reckless outlaw.

"Now you begin to show your good sense, my honest bloodhounds! Continue to act with as much prudence, and I don't doubt we'll get along admirably together."

"Release her!" gasped the almost frantic parent.

"If I should, I fear she wouldn't be worth much," laughed Captain Fly-by-Night. "Angelic creature though she be, I hardly think her wings are sufficiently grown to bear her weight safely to a stopping-place. Still, if you insist—"

A savage cry escaped the pale lips of the ranchero as he covered his eyes with his hands, both to shut out the terrible sight of his daughter in such peril and to choke down the insane longing he felt to dare all in one mad dash at the mocking villain above them.

"Come, don't be a bigger fool than nature intended, old man," said Captain Fly-by-Night insolently, as he lowered the maiden once more to the rock on which he stood. "I'll not spoil such a dainty bit of workmanship, unless you crowd me too close for comfort or refuse flatly to listen to reason."

"What do you demand? What terms do you ask?" slowly uttered the ranchero, each word coming out as though drawn by main force, in his effort to speak with calmness.

"Your life in exchange for hers!" was the stern reply.

CHAPTER V.

A SPECULATION IN LIVE STOCK.

At this savage response, the hands of more than one of the half-score cowboys dropped to their weapons, but quick as thought the prince of horse-thieves brought his captive around so as to form a living shield to his own vile carcass, his voice ringing out menacingly:

"Hands empty, you snarling coyotes! The keenest pair of eyes among you can't break my shell with a bullet that don't first shatter this dainty casket all to flinders!"

"Hold, boys!" hoarsely cried Frank Ellis, suffering such agony as only a parent can suffer when a cruel death threatens an adored child. "And you, devil, fiend! spare her, or by all the powers of heaven and hell! I swear to make you suffer ten thousand deaths in one!"

"Keep your distance, let your weapons alone, listen quietly to whatever I may have to offer, and in answering, bear in mind the important fact that you are addressing *your master*, and I pledge you my word of honor as a gentleman, a scholar, and a good judge of whisky, that this lady shall suffer no harm at my hands. On the contrary, if you persist in kicking over the traces and raising a row, I'll send her down to join you by the Air Line, then wade in and clean out the whole pack, from bull-foundland to poodle-fice!"

With difficulty Frank Ellis choked down the gust of rage which filled his entire being at this insulting tirade.

"What do you demand? What are your terms?"

"My dear fellow," drawled Captain Fly-by-Night, lazily puffing at his cigar, as he seated himself on a rock, one arm holding Lina Ellis close to his side, "you are so infernally abrupt! There's plenty of time before us, for it is against my principles to conclude a bargain while the sun is shining. You might as well 'light and take it easy for a bit."

"Name your price, and I'll pay it, if it takes my last dollar," said the ranchero, sternly. "There is no need of any further talk. Come to the point at once."

"Pay, only to take it back again, the moment I set the girl free, and you fancied her beyond the reach of my arm," laughed the outlaw. "That would make a pretty ending to our little little comedy, now wouldn't it?"

"What is it you want, then?" demanded Ellis.

"Not what I *want*, but what I *will have*," corrected the outlaw. "However, let that point pass for the present. One can't blame a tender father for speaking a little incoherently when he sees that the life of his only child hangs trembling in the balance."

"My dear colonel, here goes for business, pure and simple. I warrant that before I am through, you will better understand what sort of a hairpin I am."

"You are owner of the Ellis Ranch, which has the reputation of carrying the finest lot of blooded stock in all Colorado, bar none. That's all right. I haven't a word to say against it. I wouldn't have troubled you this time, had you been a trifle less long tongued in your boasting and not so previous in your threats."

"You laughed and sneered at the poor devils who had stock stolen and run off. You said they were more to blame than even the thieves. They should use more care, should show more sand; if they couldn't keep their property with the strong hand, they deserved to lose it. The horse-thief did not live who could take a hoof from you, and live long enough after to tell the tale of his daring exploit. And as for the desperate rascal whom men called Captain Fly-by-Night—well, you fairly hungered for a meeting with him! You would give your best horse to the man who would insure his making a call or raid on the Ellis Ranch."

"Thus the nimble tongue of Dame Rumor wagged, I've heard. Was there any truth in the old lady's babbling?"

"This much: I said that if the dirty scoundrel who called himself Captain Fly-by-Night ever bothered me or mine, I would spare no pains to hunt him down and forever put an end to his thieving. Make the most of it."

"I undoubtedly shall," was the cool retort. "Possibly you suspect the nature of the interest I feel in this fact, but that there may be no possible grounds for further doubt, allow me to introduce myself to your favorable consideration."

"I am Captain Fly-by-Night, the King-pin of horse-thieves!"

If the self-confessed outlaw anticipated creating a sensation by this impudent confession, he had his wish. Though Frank Ellis had more than suspected his identity with that infamous rascal, since his making this audacious stand, he had been too thoroughly troubled by the peril which menaced his idolized child to think of communicating that fact to any of his companions, and not one of the cowboys had thought of such a thing.

Now, as they heard that well-known title unblushingly claimed, cries of wondering execration ran through their ranks, and more than one hand moved swiftly toward pistol or rifle; for of all things, a true cowboy detests a stock-thief.

But, careless though he seemed, Captain Fly-by-Night was not one to be so easily caught napping, and at a single motion he whirled his captive around so that his person was effectually shielded behind hers, his voice ringing out sharply:

"None of that, you treacherous curs! Choke off your hounds, Frank Ellis, unless you want the blood of this girl on your head!"

"Hold, men!" cried the half-distracted father, threatening the excited cowboys with his own weapon. "Put up your tools. Would you have him murder my poor child?"

"It's durned tough, boss—tougher'n bull-hide!" grated a sturdy fellow, but yielding to the commands of his employer.

"I'll git even with the critter, ef it takes a leg!"

"Count me one in the round-up!"

"I kin lick the p'izen cuss that don't say amen to that!"

In a volleying chorus came similar remarks from each and every one of the thoroughly-angered cowboys; but Captain Fly-by-Night only laughed in careless scorn.

"I've heard a pack of coyotes yelping before now, and never lost a wink of sleep on their account. Go on with your snarling if it makes the dose taste any sweeter. I'm doing the mixing, and swallow it you must, gag as you will."

"You, Frank Ellis, listen to me a bit."

"I heard of your boasting, and as I never yet have taken a dare, I made up my mind to read you a lesson, to make you the butt and laughing-stock of the whole country. I made my arrangements so carefully that you have not a single loophole through which you can escape."

"I came to your ranch, and played you for a sucker. I managed to steal your richest, most highly-prized treasure, from under your very nose. I proved to you that instead of your having the choicest stock, the ugly, ungainly brute whom you sneered at as a cock-tail, could down your best, and he carrying double weight at that, after a forced ride of nearly a hundred miles. I have brought you out here, fifty miles from your ranch, and waited until you could come up with your crack racers—for what?"

"To send you home afoot!"

The cowboys interchanged glances of angry disgust, for now they began to comprehend what the audacious horse-thief had been working for.

"Durned ef we kin chaw *that* cud!" growled big Ben Dick, turning with a coaxing air to his employer. "You can't ax it, boss. We're hafe white an' free-born, *we* air! We'd do most anythin' to see you out of a scrumle, but that is pilin' it on jest a little *too* steep—durned ef it *hain't*, now!"

The watchful outlaw apparently suspected something was in the wind, and drew his captive to his knees as he sat on the boulder, his voice ringing out warningly:

"None of your tricks on travelers, gentlemen, *if* you please! It's my last say-so in this deal, and my hand is too heavy for you to close me out with a bluff. My dear colonel, oblige me by sitting down on those fools who are tempting you to cut the throat of your pretty daughter."

Frank Ellis hesitated, his big heart almost bursting with rage and mortification. It was indeed a bitter dose for him to swallow, and had it been only his own life at stake, he would unhesitatingly have chosen death rather than submit to such shameful humiliation.

A startling change came over the outlaw, until then so careless, almost listless, to all outward seeming. He leaped to his feet, raising the trembling form of the maiden above his head in his sinewy arms, striding to the very verge of the crag, his voice ringing out sharply, menacingly:

"Order your men to obey, or by the heavens above, I'll hurl the girl down to death on those rocks below!"

The ranchero was cowed, and though the words almost suffocated him, he called out:

"Touch not a weapon, boys. Do just as he bids you. God help us! we're wholly at his mercy and can only submit!"

Sullenly, the cowboys nodded assent, and then the tortured ranchero turned once more toward the horse-thief.

"We submit. Say on. Name your terms,

and they shall be fully kept. But release the poor child, I beg of you!"

"So you submitted before," sneered the outlaw. "This time there shall be no mistake. I will give you your orders, and I expect them to be followed without a word of argument or a single moment's delay, under penalty. You hear me?"

The ranchero nodded, for the time being unable to speak.

"Good enough!" and the outlaw lowered his captive until her feet rested on the very edge of the rock before him. "I hardly think you will try any more trickery, but I make it a point of honor to go guarded at all points. A snap-shot might send me my last sickness, but it would prove her death-warrant as well, for I swear I'll take her with me over this little step-off if I have to kick the bucket."

"I have passed my word, what more can you ask?"

"It's fulfillment," was the swift retort. "Of course I trust your honor, but all the same I prefer standing thus until your bulldogs have shed their teeth."

"Order your men, one at a time, to ride toward the foot of this rock, and deposit their weapons on the ground, without burning a grain of powder. Let one refuse, and he will have the blood of this girl resting on his head. Give the word!"

There was nothing for it but to obey, and bitter pill though they one and all found it, the ranchero mutely motioned one of his men to advance and disarm at the point indicated by the insolent villain, and equally in silence the command was obeyed by the cowboys, one after the other.

A scornful, mocking laugh burst from the lips of Captain Fly-by-Night as the ranchero, last to submit to the shameful humiliation, rode sullenly back to his former position, after dropping his rifle and belt of side arms on the little pile at the base of the crag.

"Well done, my good and faithful servants! If I had the training of you for about a week longer, I'd make marvels of obedience of you, one and all!"

"What do you think of Captain Fly-by-Night, now, my doughty colonel?"

"Ask me that question when I am free, and I will answer it," said Ellis, pale as death, his voice low and unnatural as his eyes glared upward at the horse-thief. "Now my lips are under a seal which I cannot break."

"Well, I don't know but what I *have* been rubbing it in a trifle deeply," laughed the cool rascal, resuming his seat on the boulder, still keeping one arm wound around the trembling waist of his helpless captive. "But for that you have only yourself to blame. I would never have troubled you or yours, had you not spread your boasts over the whole State, for I was doing well enough at my trade in the lower country, where the booty, if not quite so choice as that you own, or owned, was enough easier got rid of to more than make up the difference."

"But you published a dare that a man of my caliber could not afford to let pass by without accepting, and now you begin to realize the result. Not all of it, by any means, for you'll

find I am a sort of double-barreled affair, that shoots two different ways at the same time, besides kicking most powerfully in still another!"

"We have obeyed your orders. Now do your part, and set my poor child at liberty," huskily uttered the ranchero.

"Don't you get in a 'rush, my dear old fellow. I haven't got half through yet," was the cool response of the outlaw.

"What more can you demand?"

"Nothing beyond your powers of performance, my dear sir. I'm not a hog, if I do look like one. I don't want your popguns or the cold steel. You can take possession of them in a few minutes, if you like, and then use them to wipe out the shame of this day—by cutting your throats or blowing out what serves you for brains, whichever course you prefer.

"As I frankly confessed a bit ago, my particular fancy is for horseflesh. You swore I wasn't smart enough to steal a single hoof from you. I swore I'd make you travel on your own pegs. Unlike you, I always keep my vows.

"You will greatly oblige me by dismounting from those animals as the first step. Tie them by the hitch-reins in pairs on each side of a lariat, the spare end of which you can then fasten to one of your picket-pins firmly driven home. Then you can turn your backs and follow your noses straight out yonder to that skeleton on the plain, a mile or so the other side of where you now stand.

"Am I sufficiently clear in my instructions?"

"And you? If we obey this order?" huskily asked Ellis.

"Will instantly set Miss Ellis at liberty, take your horses, and leave you to trudge back to the ranch afoot. You will have time enough on the way to hatch up a yarn to account for your misfortune that will reflect a little more credit on you all than telling the simple truth."

"You'll take the horses and ride off with my child too?"

"I pledged you my word of honor as—"

A hard, bitter laugh burst from the lips of the ranchero, who was no longer able to control himself.

"Your honor! The honor of a horse-thief—a murderer—a vile kidnapper! Bah! I wonder the word does not blister your foul tongue in the utterance!"

Thick though his skin undoubtedly was, great though the command he had over his temper, this withering scorn stung the outlaw to the quick, and leaping to his feet he swung the form of his captive over his head by one arm, crying hoarsely:

"Obey, you cursed hounds, or I'll hurl her down to death! Not another word! Dismount and fasten your horses, then tramp to yonder skeleton. Hesitate a moment and she dies!"

CHAPTER VI.

A CAST FOR A LIFE.

As the severed ropes dropped from around its body, leaving only a coil or two which swiftly spun around the tree, and flew away to full length as the maddened grizzly plunged forward with wide-opened jaws, the situation was one that might well have caused a more experienced

hunter than Percy Applebee to lose his presence of mind, and turn pale with terror.

Scarce twenty feet divided them, and at its first fierce plunge the grizzly covered more than one-half of that distance, before the young hunter could realize the fact that it had suddenly regained its liberty.

But ever swift to divine and prompt to execute, Percy made one backward leap, at the same time cocking and raising his rifle.

When the lassoes gave way, leaving only a few feet of rope on the noose ends, the grizzly fell on all-fours from its former upright position against the tree, and the shock was sufficient to carry its huge head a little below the level of its back.

Thus it was when the Winchester exploded in the hands of the young man, who then leaped swiftly aside as he threw out the empty shell and pumped another cartridge into the chamber.

With a horrible roar the grizzly reared upright, its enormous paws wildly waving to and fro.

Pale as death, his eyes blazing like balls of living fire, came Lance Applebee dashing up on his blinded horse, stooping in the saddle and catching one of the severed ends of the lariats, taking a quick turn around the high pommel of his saddle as he wheeled to the right.

The heavy pluck which followed tore the rope from his benumbed fingers, but at the same time it toppled the huge brute over backward, its heavily armed paws sawing the air like the flippers of a turtle turned wrong side uppermost.

"Run for it, old fellow!" cried Burt, dashing up and raising his rifle—only to lower it again as the monster made no effort to regain its feet.

Instead, the grizzly rolled over on its side, its legs drawing together, quivering convulsively, blood and brains pouring out of its shattered skull in a torrent.

"Upset his apple-cart and spilled all his peaches, or I'm a Greaser!" cried Burt, his eyes widely opened as though he found it difficult to believe their evidence. "Not a smell left for us! Percy, you blamed old hog—put it thar!"

Laughing, Percy gripped the extended hand, while Lance joined them, not a whit less amazed than his brother at the fortunate result of what had bidden fair to prove a tragedy.

The cool nerve of the young hunter, tempered by many an encounter with the dangerous game of his childhood's home, had stood him in good stead in this emergency. His one shot had struck the grizzly fair and square between the eyes, and where an ordinary missile might easily have glanced off from that tough skull, this had shattered the bone and left a hole large enough to admit a clinched fist.*

* NOTE.—This statement may sound incredible to those who have not witnessed the wonderful effects of the weapon here alluded to: the Winchester Express, model of 1876, using an imitation of the famous English express-bullet. The ball is 50 caliber (or one-half inch in diameter) and weighs 300 grains. Its point is flat, hollowed out sufficiently to admit a copper-tube the size of a 22-cartridge, filled with the

"You fellows make as much fuss as though I had done something remarkable," laughed Percy, with a side glance at his first grizzly. "If you make such a to-do over killing a miserable little cub like this, what would you do when we meet one of those perambulating mountains on four legs. Burt is so fond of telling about?"

"Look here, Percy," said Burt, seriously. "Did I make such a nonsensical ass of myself over the drink?"

"Judge for yourself, cousin," with a humorous twinkle in his dark eyes. "I have been trying to copy your example, but mine has been only a feeble imitation. Ask Lance."

"A monumental Jerusalem pony, Burt," nodded Lance gravely, as his brother turned toward him. "Percy has been drawing it uncommonly mild in comparison, so you can judge how terribly you bored us during that entire year."

"I'll never do it again if you'll only let up now, cousin Percy," said Burt, with a sheepish grin.

"Done!" was the swift response. "And as a token, I'll freely admit that I'd rather face a wounded tiger at the same distance, than another such monster as this!"

Removing their horse to a safe distance, the cousins once more inspected and admired the dead bear before proceeding to remove its pelt and butcher the carcass.

This was scarcely completed, when Lance, who had chanced to glance toward the narrow opening which led to the level plain beyond, uttered a sharp cry, then darted to the entrance.

Startled, Burt and Percy caught up their weapons and followed him, just in time to catch a glimpse of a horseman as he vanished among the scattered rocks, some hundred rods or more below their position. Yet, brief as had been that view, they made a startling discovery.

"There's mischief in the air, lads!" muttered Lance, his big eyes all aglow. "If that man didn't carry a woman before him, then I'll never trust my eyesight again!"

"It can't be the Indians—"

"The reds are played in this section," bluntly interrupted Burt. "I saw a bundle of some sort, but whether or no it was a female critter, I can't say."

"I can," positively repeated Lance. "I caught a fair view of them as they swept past this opening, and had another before they disappeared among those rocks, and I know I'm not mistaken. That man, whoever he may be, is carrying a woman before him on the saddle. He may be her friend, but I don't believe it. I think there's some deviltry going on here."

"That's easy enough found out, if we set about it," said Burt. "We can travel faster on foot through the broken ground over yonder, than the best horse that ever wore shoes."

best of powder and fulminate. When the bullet strikes a bone, the shock is sufficient to explode the fulminate, igniting the powder, and the point of the bullet is suddenly expanded, the result being a large, dangerous, bone-crushing, blood-letting wound with a prostrating shock that the largest of game can seldom resist. Ninety-five grains of powder being used in this shell, the weapon is popularly known as the "50-95."—AUTHOR.

"Wait a bit," interposed Percy, who was the most deliberate one of the trio. "If, as you think, there is foul play in this affair, we may do more harm than good by acting hastily. Of course, I don't mean to dictate, but wouldn't it be better to steal back through the hills and cut the fellow off before he can suspect our presence or intention?"

"And maybe lose him altogether!"

"Hardly that. Percy is right. We can keep him in sight when we once get him under our eyes," hurriedly uttered Lance, as he retraced his steps to where his rifle lay near the carcass of the grizzly.

The other lads followed, Burt growling, his headlong nature revolting from a roundabout course, when a straightforward dash would do the business so much more quickly. But when Lance once decided on a movement, his more impetuous brother knew well enough how vain were all remonstrances.

Hastily, yet with all necessary caution, the three lads made their way up the rock wall which bounded the pocket on the eastern side, and then a simultaneous cry broke from the two brothers.

"There he is now!" muttered Burt, pointing toward the distant crag of rocks which overhung the level ground.

"Look out yonder!" exclaimed Lance, pointing over the plain, where rose a little cloud of dust, stringing out to the rear as it rose higher and higher. "Horsemen, and riding with a free rein, too!"

"White or red, they're following the trail of the man we caught a glimpse of!" added Percy, intensely interested.

"White, safe enough," muttered keen-eyed Burt, after a brief scrutiny of the distant riders. "And if the man in the lead ain't Frank Ellis, then he's stolen or borrowed his big gray stallion."

A sharp exclamation escaped the lips of Percy Applebee, and his cheeks grew pale as death with the terrible fear that assailed him at those words.

The brothers interchanged quick glances, for they understood the cause of that cry.

They knew that Percy had been "hard hit" by the bright, roguish eyes of pretty Lina Ellis, though the young couple had only met on a very few occasions, and they also knew that the fair maiden had shown considerable interest in the handsome ranchero.

"If it is she—which I can hardly believe—we'll rescue her from that fellow, never you fear," said Lance, encouragingly. "She'll come to no harm, as long as her father and his men are so close on the track, for her captor must know he would be killed by inches if he dared to hurt her."

"It's a mighty curious affair, durned if it ain't!" muttered Burt, curiously watching the movements of the man beyond. "If he has stolen that woman critter—if those men are on his track—why in blazes is he squatting there waiting for them to come up, instead of pulling out hot-foot? Blamed if I can see through it, nohow!"

"We're wasting time," said Percy, his voice steady and icy cold, though his pale face showed

what a storm was raging beneath that calm surface. "I feel that it is Miss Ellis, and we're in duty bound to do all we can to aid her. We must cut off his retreat, should he attempt to get away by flight."

"We can do that easily enough from here, even if we don't start until he does," said Lance, whose quick wits had taken in the situation. "We may be borrowing unnecessary trouble. That may not be Miss Ellis, or if it is, she may be with a friend. Something may have happened to her horse, and he have carried her here as the surest means of finding her friends. A thousand things may have occurred, any one of which is enough to explain what looks so strange to us."

"What do you propose doing?" calmly asked Percy.

"To wait here until those horsemen come within hailing distance of that man. It will not take long at the rate they are riding. Ha!" he suddenly exclaimed, as a wild cry came to their ears from the point of rocks. "That settles it!"

There could no longer be any doubt, for plainer far than if it had found expression in words, that wild shriek implored aid, though the outstretched arms were turned toward the mad riders on the plain beyond, not toward the young hunters.

"Follow my lead," muttered Lance, backing away until they could no longer see the crag. "I've marked out the best and shortest route for getting in his rear."

Neither Burt nor Percy responded, but followed close to the heels of their leader, trailing their rifles, stooping low as they darted along under cover of the rocks.

Suddenly Lance paused for a moment irresolute, then said:

"We have plenty of time. If that rascal meant flight, he would never have stopped there and so boldly exposed himself to open view. Wait here until I come back. I'll not be gone long."

As he uttered the last words he darted away, dashing, leaping with the agile sure-footedness of a mountain goat, down the steep wall of the pocket, running over to where the horses were tethered, snatching his coiled lasso from the saddle horn then returning at full speed.

"His head is level!" muttered Burt, with an approving nod of the head. "That'll come in good play; if not for crossing ugly places in the trail, for taking that dirty galoot prisoner and stretching his neck afterward!"

"It may be so that we can't risk a shot, without endangering her life, as well," said Lance, in hurried explanation, as he reached them and once more set off in the lead. "With this, we are armed at every point."

The course they were forced to follow, proved more difficult than any of the trio had expected, and the lasso came into good play more than once ere they reached the end.

In a far shorter time than any of them could have accomplished the feat in cold blood, the three youngsters gained the rear of the outlaw's position, and were stealing silently toward him while he was naming his humiliating terms

to the party of cowboys under command of Rancho Ellis.

Lance was still in the lead, holding his lasso coiled in readiness for instant use, while the others trod close behind him, their rifles cocked and fingers on trigger.

They were yet beyond sure range of the lasso, when Captain Fly-by-Night burst out in fury at the bitter scorn of the rancho, and their blood fairly chilled in their veins as they beheld his mad action.

Standing erect on the very verge of the crag, he raised the form of the maiden higher than his head, at the full length of his right arm, his hand grasping her clothes between the shoulders, and holding her over the jagged rocks so far below, he uttered his frightful threat.

Swift and lithe as a panther, Lance leaped forward and the lasso shot through the air. True to his aim, the lasso settled fairly over the head and shoulders of the endangered maiden, the well-greased rope drawing tight as Lance bounded back, the sharp and wholly unexpected shock dragging both girl and her captor away from the precipice, for the right hand of Captain Fly-by-Night was caught inside the noose.

A sharp scream from Lina—a furious curse from the outlaw—then Captain Fly-by-Night leaped to his feet, dragging the maiden with him, jerking out his gleaming knife to cut the rope, or else to bury the steel in her bosom.

At that instant Percy fired, and with a gurgling oath, the outlaw fell to the ground, the knife flying from his hand.

Percy darted forward, pale as a ghost, and caught Lina in his arms, while Lance removed the lasso from around her form.

Burt also dashed forward, but he gave the bleeding outlaw nor the girl a second glance. He paused on the point of the crag, a ringing hillo bursting from his lips, as he looked down upon the startled and amazed horsemen.

"Hello, you critters down thar! Any one in your outfit lost a package o' dry-goods?"

"My daughter—where is she?" gasped the rancho.

"Evening to ye, Mr. Ellis! Thought I knowed ye, when I caught the first glimp' a bit ago of that big gray."

"My child—curse you! where is she?" hoarsely cried the almost distracted father, spurring his horse nearer the foot of the crag, his countenance wildly distorted. "If you've hurt her, I'll kill you by inches!"

"And serve me mighty right, too," coolly retorted Burt, though his frank countenance flushed a little at the fierce address. "She's up here safe enough—*Waal I ber-durned!*"

Burt whirled swiftly on his heel as a fierce, snarling cry came to his ears, and that ejaculation was extorted from his lips by a thrilling, unexpected sight.

Captain Fly-by-Night scrambled to his feet, and leaped upon Percy Applebee from behind, both hands grasping his neck with a ferocious energy that paralyzed the surprised youth.

"Take a man o' your own size, *dug GUN ye!*" grated Burt, dashing forward and leaping on the outlaw's shoulders.

CHAPTER VII.

DEFENDING A PRISONER.

WITH Burt's whole weight cast into the leap which carried him on the rounded back of Captain Fly-by-Night, whose every energy was devoted to strangling Percy Applebee, there could be but one result. The trio fell to the ground in a heap, struggling, kicking, growling, like so many wild beasts.

No less than the others, Lance was taken by surprise, for one and all had believed the audacious outlaw slain outright by the snap-shot which had laid him low, but the instant he understood the situation of affairs, he dropped Lina, who had been thrown violently into his arms by Percy as Captain Fly-by-Night leaped upon him so savagely, and drawing a revolver he darted to where the three men fought, watching his chance and dealing the outlaw a deft blow on the head with the heavy pistol-butt.

"Hold up *you!*" cried Burt, in a tone of utter disgust, as the steel-like muscles of the outlaw suddenly lost their rigidity and his furious struggles ceased. "Three men on one ain't the solid thing. You're always spoilin' a feller's fun, Lance Applebee!"

The relief came none too soon for Percy, however. That deadly grip on his throat could not have been maintained much longer without resulting in suffocation. As it was, his eyes were wildly protruding, his face turning black, and he lay almost like a corpse, as Lance dragged Captain Fly-by-Night off him after dealing that quieting stroke.

In falling, Lina Ellis struck her temple against a point of rock, with force sufficient to break the skin and draw blood freely, the result being the rapid restoration of her senses. Wildly she glanced around her, and seeing the three cousins apparently engaged in deadly battle with the outlaw, a wild cry escaped her lips.

Lance turned swiftly, and seeing her attempt to arise, he darted forward and caught her in his arms.

"There is no longer any danger, Miss Ellis," he said, hurriedly. "We are friends—the Applebees—and your father is coming. If you still feel faint, a drop from this flask will not injure you."

In the present shattered state of her nerves, it may be doubted whether Lina Ellis comprehended even if she heard these hastily uttered words, but if she failed to recognize the honest young face which bent over her, there was something in his voice that assured her she had nothing to fear from him. Faint, trembling, overcome by all she had been forced to undergo during those past few hours, she lay sobbing on the bosom of the young ranchero, who seemed to find it a most delightfully embarrassing situation.

Burt first assured himself that Captain Fly-by-Night was rendered incapable of further mischief for the time being, then turned his attention to his cousin. Luckily for Percy, the outlaw had been too greatly confused by that hasty shot, the bullet tearing through the skin over his temples with force sufficient to knock him down, but not striking squarely enough to

explode the shell, to draw a deadly weapon before making his impetuous attack on the man who was robbing him of his prize, and the young man had only suffered from that severe choking. Under the ministrations of Burt he quickly recovered, pronouncing himself as good as ever.

"Mighty glad to hear it," said Burt, with a curling lip as he glanced toward his brother. "Lance 'pears to have his hands full, and I want a little help 'bout trussing this critter up, before those fellows from below can get here. If *they* do the roping, it'll be with a single noose, and that serving as a necktie!"

"She is not hurt?" muttered Percy.

"Does that look like it?" grunted Burt, as he rolled the outlaw over on his face, then squatted across his shoulders. "Cut up that *riata*, in a hurry! I hear them swarming up the rocks, red-hotter than the business end of a bald hornet!"

As he spoke, Burt looked in the direction from whence came the sounds telling of the approach of Frank Ellis and his cowboys. At the same instant a violent convulsion from beneath almost cast him headlong to the ground, and before he could fairly divine what had occurred, or regain his balance, Captain Fly-by-Night had almost regained his footing.

"Durned ef you hain't got more lives than a tomcat!" the young ranchero indignantly cried, as he whirled around and drove the outlaw once more to the ground, face downward. "Now you want to let up on your pesky foolishness, or blamed if I don't sink a mineral shaft clean through your *cabeza!*"

Such was the tableau that met the agitated gaze of Frank Ellis as he rushed over the rocks to the spot. Too greatly excited to either see or reason clearly, he uttered a hoarse cry of vengeance as he beheld the form of his idolized daughter reclining in the arms of a man, and like a maniac he leaped toward them, murder in his eyes.

Fortunately Lance was on the lookout for his coming, and heard his footsteps in time to cry out:

"Your daughter is safe, Mr. Ellis. That scoundrel hadn't time to do her injury, before we keeled him over."

With a glad cry, Lina Ellis released herself from the supporting arms of the young ranchero, and fell into the warm embrace of her father, sobbing hysterically.

Close upon the heels of their employer, came the half-score cowboys, weapons in hand and blood in their eyes.

When he heard the words of Burt Applebee, after the sudden and for the instant inexplicable disappearance of the daring outlaw and his fair captive, Ellis had rushed to the spot where their weapons were stacked, and regaining his arms, in which example he was imitated by the cowboys, had lost no time in scaling the rocks by the shortest practicable route.

And now, revolvers in hand, the cowboys were crowding around the spot where Burt still squatted on the back of Captain Fly-by-Night, his pistol-muzzle buried in the curling locks which thatched the outlaw's skull.

"No crowding, if you please, gents!" said

Burt, sharply, as Percy pinned the hands of their captive with the noose of the lasso which had proven of such inestimable service.

"Hitch it 'round his p'izen neck an' save trouble o' our shiftin' it!" growled Big Ben Dick, chief herder.

With swift dexterity, Burt took a couple of turns around the outlaw's legs with the rope, and tied it fast, then boldly faced the angry men.

"I don't want to be impolite, but I'd like to know who in thunder's running this funeral, anyway?"

Clear and imperious rung out his voice, as Burt boldly confronted the rough men, revolver cocked in hand, his round, boyish face hard-set, his blue eyes flushing vividly. And, boy though he was, the herders were obliged to respect him.

A fierce oath broke from the bloody lips of Captain Fly-by-Night as he struggled desperately to burst his bonds or loosen them sufficiently to enable him to regain his feet.

Better for him, perhaps, had he lain quiet, for as their attention was thus called more particularly to him, the cowboys burst out anew, recalling the bitter humiliation he had heaped on them when he held the whip-hand. Not loud, but all the more ominous from its very intensity, arose the cry for blood.

Big Ben Dick shook one mighty fist warningly, and his mates subsided for the moment, while he spoke:

"We don't want any row, youngster. You did us all a good turn when you roped in that p'izen cuss. But all the same you don't want to stan' atween us an' our gittin' even. That man is Cap'n Fly-by-Night. He run off Miss Lina an' treated her wuss then I would a coyote. He throwed dirt all over us, an' then rubbed it in with spit. Ef the or'nary whelp hed a thousan' lives, the hull on 'em wouldn't be hafe enough to wipe out all that!"

"That's all right, old man," coolly retorted Burt, standing over his captive, while Lance and Percy ranged themselves by his side, revolvers in hand ready for instant use, in case the stern necessity should arise. "I'm not disputing your word in any respect. We all saw enough to know that this fellow is not an angel in breeches, and—"

"Then what's the use talkin' any furdur?" sharply interposed the giant. "We've sworn to make him pull hemp, an' he's got to make our words good. Ef you don't want to hev a finger in the pie, you kin stan' aside an' look on."

"We'll do a heap more than that," impatiently cried the young ranchero.

"What more kin you do? An' we ten men ag'in' three!"

"The odds were still greater a while ago," coolly interposed Lance. "It was ten against one then; and that one man made you eat humble-pie by the buck-load. You knuckled down at his bidding, and only for us he would still be holding you at bay. We took him prisoner, and by the Lord of Israel! we'll hold on to him as long as we can strike a blow or pull a trigger in defense of our rights!"

"Look out that you don't git strung up in

comp'ny fer bein' too durned thick with the cussed hoss-thief!"

"Where'll you get recruits to help you tackle that little job?" grinned Burt, nothing daunted.

"Too much talk!" growled one of the cowboys. "Pile in an' round 'em up too, ef they won't give way!"

"Better count the cost first!" wailed Lance.

"Look here, you!" added Burt, sharply, half raising his pistols, as the cowboys seemed on the point of making a rush that could only end in death and bloodshed. "We captured this fellow. He may be Captain Fly-by-Night, the horse-thief, as you say. We don't deny that, because we don't know for sure. But this much we *do* know. We captured the fellow alive. We mean to keep him alive until we can turn him over to the proper authorities to answer for whatever crimes may be proven against him. If you try to take him from us, for the purpose of lynching him, you've got to kill us first. And while you're doing that, some of your crowd has got to turn toes-up for good and all.

"Now you've got it, straight as a string. Go on with your rat-killing if you think you can stand the pressure!"

Until this crisis Frank Ellis had eyes, ears, thoughts for naught else save his child, whom he hugged to his heaving bosom in an ecstasy of delight, but the loud, harsh tones of those who were disputing over the possession of the captive horse-thief now attracted his attention, and he cried:

"What's the row now, boys?"

"Simply this, Mr. Ellis," quickly uttered Lance before either of the cowboys could speak. "Your men swear they mean to lynch this fellow, whom we claim as our prisoner."

"Curse him! he deserves death a thousand times over!" the ranchero fiercely grated.

The interference of the ranchero caused the three lads to relax their vigilance, for they believed all danger was at an end; but never were they more sadly mistaken.

The cowboys saw their chance, and as the fierce speech of their employer told them they would meet with no serious obstruction from that quarter, at a sign from Big Ben Dick, they leaped upon the trio, knocking or wresting the weapons from their hands, while others of their number pounced on the horse-thief and flung a noosed lasso around his neck, dragging him toward the crag, over the edge of which they meant to cast him, to die the death of a dog.

But before they could complete their work, Burt tore free from his assailant, and darting to where the rifle used by Percy had dropped, he caught it up, threw out the empty shell and pumped another cartridge into the chamber. Then the tube of death covered the form of Lina Ellis, as he cried sternly:

"Hold, you curs! Drop that man, or by the Lord above us, I'll send a bullet through the brain of that girl!"

Frightful as the threat was, not one who heard his words, who saw his white, hard-set face and gleaming eyes, could for a moment doubt the deadly earnestness of the thoroughly aroused youth, and the cowboys stopped short.

as though paralyzed, while a gasping cry escaped the lips of the ranchero:

"Hold! are you mad? would you murder my child?"

"Not unless you crowd me. Make them turn that man over to us; make them swear that they will not try to lynch him again, or hinder us in any way when we are turning him over to justice; do this, or I swear I'll scatter her brains all over you, even as you hold her in your arms!"

Choking, the ranchero made a gesture to his men.

"Obey—don't you see the boy is just mad enough to do as he threatens? Let that demon go, and promise."

"Ef you say so, boss," growled Big Ben Dick. "But I'll git even with the little cuss afore his head turns gray!"

"When, where and how you please, baby," laughed Burt, still holding his rifle at a level, until Lance and Percy took possession of the horse-thief. "And now, Mr. Ellis, I beg your pardon for all I have said or done. I could see no other way out of the tangle. If you had obliged me to shoot her, I'd have blown my own brains out with the next cartridge. I could do that, but never could I have stood by and witnessed the murder of a helplessly bound man whom I had aided in capturing!"

Despite himself, Frank Ellis could not avoid feeling a strong admiration for the lad as he spoke so frankly, and he did not refuse the hand which Burt extended.

"You are right, though it seemed hard enough at the time to let that demon escape with his life," he said, slowly.

"He shall not escape. I swear that if his crimes deserve it, he shall suffer death on the gallows" said Burt, solemnly.

CHAPTER VIII.

A BITTER DOSE TO SWALLOW.

"ALL right," said the ranchero, more like his usual self. "After the great service you have rendered me and mine, I could not complain, though you asked a much greater boon than that. If you say he must have a fair trial, before a regular court, I'll back you up in carrying out your plans."

"Better string me up, now you've got the dead wood on me, or I'll fool you yet!" snarled Captain Fly-by-Night, his eyes glowing like those of a cornered wolf.

The ranchero turned sharply upon him, but the hot words which were rising in his throat were abruptly checked, as a shrill neigh broke upon the air, and the long-legged black stallion came trotting around the rocks which had until now hidden him from view.

"Catch that horse!" cried Ellis, excitedly; but before one of the cowboys could make any move toward obeying, a sharp whistle broke from the captive horse-thief, and in prompt obedience, Black Wolf wheeled on his heels and dashed away, the cowboys setting out in pursuit.

"You may hang me, but you'll never lay hands on my good horse!" cried Captain Fly-by-Night, with a mocking laugh. "In that I can foil you, Fool Ellis!"

The ranchero turned away without reply, though it was clear enough he was deeply chagrined at the loss of the black wonder; for, on foot and without even a lasso, the cowboys stood little enough chance of capturing the stallion.

The sun had sunk to rest, and the night was rapidly coming on. The three young hunters consulted together in whispers for a few minutes, then Lance spoke to the ranchero:

"Of course you are not thinking of returning to your ranch to-night, neighbor? Miss Ellis looks nearly worn out as it is, and could hardly stand the trip."

"No," hesitated Ellis. "I reckon we'll have to make a night of it here, comfortless though a dry and hungry camp will be. Even if she could stand it, our horses are about worn out. They must have rest and grazing, at all events."

"If you will accept our hospitality, we can give you a bite and sup," laughed Lance. "Cold water and bear-meat are considerably better than nothing, when better is lacking."

"Bear-meat? Then you youngsters have succeeded in rounding up that old grizzly there's been so much talk about?" the ranchero asked, his face all aglow with interest, for himself an ardent sportsman, he could appreciate bold exploits in others.

Lance briefly detailed their experience with the bear, while preparations were being made for their proceeding to the little mountain-pocket to pass the night.

In answer to the signal of their employer, the cowboys came straggling back from their unavailing chase after the equine wonder which they were all so eager to capture, and as Captain Fly-by-Night sullenly refused to walk, even when his legs were untied, and Burt stubbornly resisted the grim proposal of Big Ben Dick to warm up his stiffened muscles with a rope's-end well applied, the horse-thief was carried down to the level and there bound on the back of one of the horses.

The pocket was soon reached, near the mouth of which a small spring bubbled forth from beneath a rock, forming a little pool before running away through the prairie grass.

By this time it was quite dark, but busy hands make short work, and ere many minutes two camp-fires were kindled, bear-steaks cut and in the process of roasting before the blaze.

The prisoner was conveyed within the pocket and bound to the trunk of the tree beneath which the grizzly had met its death. As he was by far too valuable a captive for any unnecessary risk to be run, one of the cowboys was detailed as guard, with orders not to move out of sight of the outlaw until duly relieved by his successor.

The camp itself was pitched inside the pocket, closer to the entrance, where the grass was thicker and more comfortable, while the horses were staked out on the plain beyond, to fill themselves with grass while resting from their killing race.

Burt acted as cook for one party, consisting of the ranchero and his daughter and the three young hunters; and while he was thus em-

ployed, Lance and Percy built a rude but snug little hut of evergreens close to the rock wall, in which the ranchero's daughter might pass a comfortable night in comparative seclusion.

This was completed at about the time Burt announced supper, and soon thereafter a merry little company was gathered around the fire, laughing and chatting as they ate.

As a matter of course, the main topic of conversation was the audacious trickery of Captain Fly-by-Night.

"He's a mighty bold rascal, but I reckon we've clipped his wings this time, for good and all," said Burt, speaking as well as he could for a huge mouthful of juicy bear-steak.

There was a dark shadow on the face of the ranchero as he made reply, that spoke even plainer than his words:

"I'm afraid we haven't seen the whole of his game, even yet. Reckless dare-devil though he is admitted to be on all sides, it does not seem possible that he would run such great risk, simply on the chance of getting the nags on which we chased him. I could wish myself at the ranch, to-night."

"You don't think he was playing a double-barreled game, do you?" eagerly demanded Burt. "That while he led you off here, his gang was to raid the ranch?"

"I don't know what to think," was the moody response, as the ranchero filled his pipe and picked a coal from the fire between them with which to ignite the tobacco. "I only know that I feel all out of sorts. But it can't be helped now. Lina is not fit to take such a long ride without rest, and I'll not let her out of my sight again, though my every dollar depended on it."

A few moments later, the ranchero arose and went out to look after the horses, leaving Burt and Lance together. As for Lina and Percy, they had for some minutes been conversing apart, her face in the shade, but the red firelight showing his handsome countenance all aglow with pleasure and animation.

With a discontented grunt, Burt nodded in their direction and muttered so that none save Lance could hear him:

"It's a p'izen shame, that's just what it is! As good a boy as you could scare up in seventeen States, and chuck-full o' fun, too. It'll knock our plans west-end-and-crooked!"

"What are you trying to get at, anyway, boy Burt?"

"Hain't you got eyes, and can't you use them?" sniffed Burt, in utter disgust. "Can't you see how he's looking at that girl? And how she hugs up to him, like a sick kitten to a hot brick? In love, all two both of 'em, over head and ears!"

Lance gazed toward the couple under discussion for a few moments in silence, then said, with a short, forced laugh:

"It does look something that way, and you may be right, boy Burt. If so, perhaps the shortest way to cure him will be to help his courtship along all we know how—lucky dog!"

Abruptly rising, Lance strode away from the fire, Burt staring after him with widely opened eyes—opened in more senses than one.

"How I *will* be blessed!" he muttered, catch-

ing his breath as though some one had suddenly given him a douche of ice-cold water. "Lance too! If I'd 'a' thought *that*, blamed if I wouldn't 'a' let Cap. Fly-by-Night chuck her over the rock!"

Right or wrong, Burt felt convinced that not only was his cousin Percy in love with Lina Ellis, but that poor Lance had a severe touch of the same complaint, and this completed his disgust. The world seemed "hollow, and his doll stuffed with sawdust," just then.

Also leaving the fire, he walked over to where Captain Fly-by-Night was secured to the honey locust tree, his figure only dimly visible in the shade, though the stars were shining so brightly, and the nearly full moon was just peeping over the rock wall.

"You've had some grub, I suppose?" he grunted, as he dropped down near the prisoner. "We don't mean to starve you."

"You're the man that jumped me from behind, I believe?" asked the prisoner, his voice smooth and musical.

"Following the example you set me, yes; you jumped my pard, and I mounted you after the same fashion."

"Oh, I'm not squealing. I only wanted to be sure, as I am a man who never remains in debt to his fellow-creatures an hour longer than he can help."

"I hardly think you'll pay more than one debt—"

"That of nature, by dancing at the end of a rope, you mean?" with a short, careless laugh. "My dear boy, if you live until that comes to pass, your memory will be handed down to posterity as the modern Methusalem!"

"All right," laughed Burt. "If the thought will make you rest any more comfortably to-night, be sure I'll not try to drive it away. Only, I'm not betting my money on your living long enough to sport gray hairs."

"There's many a stranger thing than that happened. You'd hardly believe me, were I to say that instead of your taking me to prison a captive, I'll have you where the wool's short inside of a week? Instead of being the captive, I'll be the captor? Instead of witnessing me dance on nothing, you will be the one to furnish the amusement?"

"Well, hardly," grinned the young ranchero.

"It *does* sound rather extravagant," admitted the horse-thief; "but all the same, keep that picture in your mind's eye and see what the harvest will be. And now, if it's all the same to you, perhaps you'll be kind enough to leave me to get a little sleep. If I'm to perform that dance, I'll require all my powers, you see—ha! ha!"

Turning away, Burt could hardly repress a shudder at the reckless laugh which rung in his ears, coming from one whose many crimes would so surely doom him to an ignominious death. It sounded like the unearthly merriment of a corpse.

Burt found Lance awaiting him near where their saddles and other equipage were placed, and though he watched him closely to discover whether or no his sudden and startling suspicions were founded on fact, he was baffled. Lance was the same old fellow, and after walking out

to see that their horses were safely picketed where they could graze freely, they returned to be joined by Percy, who had parted with Lina.

The maiden had retired to the hut constructed for her use, and the ranchero was lying close beside it, as though resolved no further alarm should assail his child.

Neither of the youngsters felt in the humor for sitting up or conversing. Each one had absorbing thoughts to occupy their brains, but which they did not feel inclined to make a topic of conversation, and shortly after the encampment was wrapped in silence.

Seated close to the captive, one of the cowboys smoked his pipe, the red glow brightening and dying away in the darkness with the regularity of clockwork, long after all the rest of the men were soundly sleeping. And Captain Fly-by-Night himself, seemed as deeply buried in slumber as the rest.

But that night was not to pass without its exciting and stirring events, though the stars alone witnessed all that occurred, and they never whispered the truth to mortal ear.

All at once it seemed as though pandemonium had broken loose, and the sleepers leaped to their feet with exclamations of alarm and bewilderment.

From the plain beyond came wild yells and screeches, mingling with the thundering of many hoofs, with the terrified screams and affrighted neighing of horses.

"Outside, men!" thundered Frank Ellis, darting to the entrance of the pocket. "The stock is stampeded!"

High above the wild tumult came a voice from the plain:

"My compliments to the rope and hangman, Frank Ellis! I borrow your horses. When you've stocked up again, I'll make you another call!"

A clear, mocking laugh that seemed to be swiftly receding with the clatter of hoofstrokes as an accompaniment.

A howl of fury from Burtis Applebee as he snarled:

"Cap. Fly-by-Night! Who turned him loose?"

As he spoke, he dashed toward the tree to which the captive had been bound, only to start back with a still wilder cry, as he stumbled over the prostrate form of the cowboy who had been stationed as guard. A gleam of moonlight came down through the foliage of the honey-locust, falling athwart the face of the dead man—for dead he was, his own knife sticking haft deep in his broad bosom.

"Durn and double durn my fool soul for trusting the care of that demon to any one but my own self!" cried the lad, his voice hoarse with rage, his face transfigured into that of a man almost beside himself. "I might have knowed it!"

"Look out, you!" snarled a cowboy, who sunk on his knees beside the corpse, and lifted the head of the dead man to his heaving bosom. "Don't you say a word ag'in' pore Dan. He was my pard. I loved him more then a brother, an' now he's dead—butchered by that cussed thief you fit for! Cuss your lights! ef you hedn't interfered, we'd 'a' hung the dirty imp, an' my mate wouldn't be like this! But I'll hev

revinge—on you, ef I cain't reach that hell-hound!"

"And I—I'll register an oath!" said Burt, suddenly calming down outwardly. "I swear that I'll never know rest, never leave the trail of Captain Fly-by-Night, until the murder of this man is avenged! I'll bring him back, dead or alive, or else leave my own carcass on the trail!"

CHAPTER IX.

TRAILING BY TORCHLIGHT.

IN the complete surprise which had fallen upon them, only Burtis Applebee and the mate of the murdered cowboy thought of inspecting the spot where Captain Fly-by-Night had been left bound and under guard when slumber fell upon the camp, Frank Ellis, Lance and Percy, with the remainder of the men, rushing pell-mell to the pocket-entrance and out on the plain across which they could still hear the trampling of hoofs, though rapidly growing fainter and more distant.

Fierce indeed were the curses that burst from their lips as the gate-like entrance was passed, and they could see the full extent of their misfortune.

Not a horse remained where they had been staked out to graze in the early part of the night. One and all had joined in the mad stampede, and were already far beyond reach, thundering away over the level ground which skirted the rocky range, barely visible through the deceptive shadows cast by the thin, flying clouds which swept across the face of the moon at rapid intervals.

A shrill, taunting laugh came floating back to their ears from the same direction, and then in swift succession came several bright flashes, and with vicious humming, ragged lead whistled past, fortunately finding no victim.

Thus directed, the outwitted stockmen could distinguish a human figure, mounted on a tall horse, riding close in the rear of the fleeing *cavallada*.

A passionate oath came from the lips of the ranchero as he drew his revolvers and sent shot after shot in the direction of the flying horseman, an example which was promptly followed by his men, some of whom dashed away in swift pursuit of the cunning horse-thief, as though they expected to overtake him on foot.

Attracted by the rapid firing, Burt came rushing out, only to have his suddenly awakened hopes put to flight when he discovered the real facts.

"Better call your men back, Ellis," he said, his voice hard and unnatural. "They might as well chase a shadow as to follow that rascal afoot. Captain Fly-by-Night won't be caught so easily as al that comes to."

The ranchero turned upon him sharply. Although he himself had pronounced the audacious stampeder Captain Fly-by-Night, he had not really believed what he spoke.

"What! you don't mean to say—"

"I just do," was the blunt interruption. "Captain Fly-by-Night has been as good as his name, and taken leg-bail, leaving a dead man behind him."

"Not Dan Cheering?" exploded the ranchero,

"Dan somebody, 'tanyrate; laid out cold as a wedge, with a knife planted in his heart. Somebody must have helped him, of course. I'd give the best year of my life to know just who it was and how it was done!"

Among those who listened to this speech, were Lance and Percy Applebee, and the same sickening dread assailed them both, though Lance was the one to first give it utterance:

"Ellis, did you look to see if Miss Lina was safe, before you left the pocket?"

"You don't think— I vow, if he has harmed her, I'll follow him to hell itself but what I'll have revenge!" chokingly uttered the ranchero, as he rushed back to the pocket, followed by the young men.

But scarcely had he passed the entrance, before a glad cry escaped his lips, for there, just emerging from her little brush hut, was the figure of Lina Ellis, looking pale and scared, but otherwise none the worse for this nocturnal alarm.

"Father, what is the matter?" she asked, as the ranchero rushed forward and clasped her tightly in his strong arms.

The three young men drew back, feeling as though they were interlopers, and began consulting together in low tones.

"It's an ugly prospect," said Lance, with a glance upward to the sky, across which the clouds were rapidly gathering. "Not a hoof left us, and a storm brewing. We can do nothing until day comes: and that is good three hours away!"

"You can wait, if you feel like it," gloomily responded Burt, sadly changed from his light-hearted self by the tragic events which had crowded so rapidly upon them. "But I'm not going to lose any more time. If the moon fails us, I can follow the trail by torchlight, and be that far along when the sun comes up."

"If the rascal keeps the horses together, that will do you little good," said Lance, quietly. "Our shortest way will be to strike out for the ranch, and then take the trail with our hounds. Soon or late, we must run the fellow to earth."

"Look here," said Burt, with desperate calmness. "Only for me, the boys would have hung that hell-hound. I saved his life, because I believed it a duty. Through my means, Captain Fly-by-Night was brought here unharmed. He got away, and in doing so, he murdered an innocent man. I feel that this was partly my fault. Indeed, the pard of the dead man swore that his blood rested on my head; swore that if the actual murderer escaped him, he would seek vengeance on me. In turn I swore to know no rest until I had taken the assassin, dead or alive."

"I mean to keep that oath, or die on the trail!"

"They can't blame you for what happened, any more—"

"They *do* blame me," coldly interrupted Burt. "Right or wrong, they put it on my shoulders, and there it will stay as long as Captain Fly-by-Night runs loose. For that reason, I'll never take a step backward while I have an ounce of strength or a single breath left in my carcass!"

"We're with you, of course, if you're so re-

solved," calmly replied Lance, while Percy warmly caught their hands in his with a grasp that told how entirely he united in the vow.

The light from heaven's luminaries was momentarily growing less and less, and as the lads separated to search for material which would serve as torches, the sounds of returning footsteps came to their ears, and they heard the ranchero challenging his men.

"Mought as well set a tarrypin to chasin' a prong-horn!" growled Big Ben Dick. "The dirty cuss holds the critters all in a bunch, jest as though he hed them hitched together with thar trail-ropes, an' he's drivin' them fer all that's out!"

"And he'll keep them so, unless we crowd him all we can," retorted the ranchero. "It's the stock he was after from the jump-off, and if we give him full swing, never a hoof will we clap eyes on again!"

"We'll do the best we kin, boss," returned the giant cowboy, respectfully. "But thar's mighty little show fer two legs against four, 'specially on a dark night as this is settin' in fer to turn out."

"Talk less and do more!" cried the voice of Burt Applebee, as he came out from the darkness, bearing a knot of pitch-pine. "I'll lift the trail as fast as you fellows care to follow me, if you'll furnish stuff for torches. Git down to work, and hurry along as soon as you find the stuff."

Splintering one end of the knot with his bowie, Burt set it afire, shading it with his hat as he hastened out from the pocket and along in the direction taken by the stampeded animals, accompanied by his brother and cousin.

Frank Ellis hesitated, but it was only for a moment.

"If you are thinking of me, father," said Lina, clinging to his arm, "do not let that worry you. I am rested, and can endure as much as the best man among you. Come—let's follow our gallant trailers!"

She spoke lightly, really feeling a strange sort of delight in the wild adventure, now that she knew she was safe under the care of her parent and her friends. She knew nothing of the dead man who still lay beneath the locust tree, watched over by his mourning pard, and Ellis was only too ready to lead her away from that blood-stained spot, lest the sad discovery be made by his loved one.

Straight for the point where the fleeting shadows had last been sighted, hastened Burt, scarce casting a glance at the deeply-scored turf; but then he stooped lower, crossing the trail at right angles, as though seeking for some particular track among the many hoof-prints.

"I knowed it!" he suddenly exclaimed, pausing and pointing to the clearly-outlined trail of a single horse, which had as plainly been the last to pass that way. "The pizen cuss is ridin' his own horse!"

Eagerly the cowboys crowded around, closely scrutinizing the hoof-prints, and not one among them all could deny the assertion of the young ranchero. Beyond a doubt, Captain Fly-by-Night was once more in possession of his marvelous steed.

"That settles it as fur as *he* is consarned!" growled Big Ben Dick. "Lightnin' couldn't ketch the cuss as long's he's a-straddle o' that critter! Mought as well give it over fer a bigger contract then we kin han'le, fust as last!"

"You can draw out as quick as you please," bluntly said Burt, resuming his trailing. "But I'm betting my ducats that I'll fetch him to taw in less than a week."

"Talk's cheap, an' comes mighty easy out the mouth of a boy," sniffed the giant, with a tone of contempt and dislike.

"Look here *you*!" cried Burt, turning toward the growler, his blue eyes flashing vividly in the red glare of the torch. "You call yourself a monstrous bad man, Big Ben Dick, but all the same you want to go a little slow in the presence of your betters, or maybe you'll find a boy smart enough to climb all cver a man-mountain of your caliber and ugliness."

"Mebbe you think you're that same boy?"

"I don't *think*—I *know* it! And *you'll* know it, too—"

"Come!" sharply interposed Frank Ellis, just then hurrying up with Lina on his arm. "No quarreling among ourselves when there is more important work to do."

"Then put a muzzle on that bull-dog of yours," sharply added Burt. "I've no particular grudge against him, but if he keeps on snarling at my heels I'll pull his teeth, if I have to take head and all with them!"

"You hear the little cuss, boss!" exclaimed the giant imploringly to his employer. "Kin I stan' that an' not say a word back? Kin I let him crow—"

"You just can," was the stern response. "Unless you want to settle it with me, instead."

With a sullen growl the giant subsided, falling back to the rear, while Burt led the way once more along the trail.

Not for many rods more, however, without another interruption. He came to an abrupt halt, crying aloud:

"Hold back, all of you!" and waving his torch from side to side, he moved in rapid zigzags across the trail.

"Hurrah for our side!" he cried, rising erect and swinging the torch above his head as his wild cheer rung out on the early morning air, until it was echoed back from the rock-hills to the right.

"What is it now?" demanded Ellis, impatiently.

"Good luck for us—crooked luck for that p'izen hoss-thief!" cried Burt. "The critters have broke and scattered at this point. He's lost his grip on them, and I warrant, if we had light enough to see a mile, we'd find our animals are less than that distance from where we now stand!"

Sharp and clear rung out a shrill whistle from the lips of the youngster, and scarce had its echoes died away before an answer came in the shape of a faint neigh. A few moments later, with swift hoofs beating the dry soil, a horse came galloping up to the spot and Burt laughed exultantly.

"My horse at any rate! It will do for a starter. Scatter and look for the others, lads.

Ten to one we'll get all mounted before day fairly breaks!"

He mounted his horse without saddle or bridle and dashed away through the gloom, seeking for other animals.

The spot where the trail divided was barely a mile from the pocket, and as all their horse equipage was there, after a brief period of waiting, during which he could hear the exultant cries from the young ranchero as he discovered other horses, Frank Ellis turned and walked back to the pocket with his daughter.

Before he reached his destination he was overtaken by the three cousins, each one mounted on their own horses, bearing most cheering news. One by one the cowboys were recovering their animals, and there was little doubt but what Burt's prediction would prove true, and the arrival of day-dawn find them once more mounted and ready for the trail.

"He thought he had driven the animals far enough, no doubt, and when they made a break would not waste any further time in trying to pick them up again," concluded the ranchero as he walked beside Lina, who was mounted on Percy's horse.

"And right there's where he'll get mighty bad fooled, or you can call me no prophet," affirmed Burt, once more in his usual spirits. "I've sworn to corral the imp, and I'll make my word good or bu'st something in trying—that's flat!"

At that moment a strange sound startled them, coming from over the plain. Again—and then Burt cried out in amaze:

"Sweet-lips or I'm a sinner! What's up now?"

"She can't have followed our trail, for we didn't come by that route!" added Lance, no less amazed than his brother.

Their suspense was brief, for a couple of hounds swept up to where they stood, followed by a man, who cried hoarsely:

"Thar's little ole hell to pay, boss, at the Ellis Ranch!"

CHAPTER X.

THE HORSE-THIEF'S STRATEGY.

In the man who spurred up to them, his horse with foam-covered and steaming flanks, the young hunters recognized one of their own *vaqueros*, and it was to Lance that that hurried, startling speech was made.

"Kenworthy!" cried the young ranchero, springing to the side of the man, his eyes aglow, his voice excited. "What's up now? What brings you out here?"

"I didn't 'spect fer to find *you*, boss," replied the cowboy, dismounting from his wearied nag, and wiping his heated brow. "I was hunting fer old Ellis—"

"I am here," sharply interposed the ranchero named, stepping forward and confronting the man. "What do you want?"

"Your place raided an' cleaned plum out!" was the blunt, startling response, and Frank Ellis turned pale as death, for the blow was none the less severe because he had partly anticipated some such misfortune long before the messenger made his appearance.

"Blame it, man!" impatiently cried Burt, coming forward and confronting the cowboy. "Can't you say something plainer than that? Who were the raiders? When did it happen? How came you to find out?"

"Let him have time to catch his breath," said Ellis, his voice cold and even. "There's time enough. We can do nothing until the boys come in with their stock."

"Then we might as well have a little breakfast to travel on afterward," said Percy, with a short laugh. "We'll just have time to prepare and swallow it before day-dawn."

"We'll take it out by the spring," hastily added Ellis, remembering the corpse which still lay within the pocket, and desirous of keeping all knowledge of the tragedy from his child until she was safely at home once more.

"All right," supplemented Burt. "Strip your nag, Kenworthy; give him a mouthful of water, then stake him out to pick a little grass, and he'll be fit enough for further work when you need him."

The cowboy obeyed, leading his sweat-covered horse to the little pool of water and suffering it to drink a few swallows of the grateful element before choking it off and leading it out to gradually cool off.

Lance and Percy quickly gathered material for building a fire, while Burt cut a plentiful supply of meat for cooking. And while they were thus engaged, Kenworthy told his story.

Shortly before sunset, he had been sent by Colonel Charles Applebee over to the Ellis Ranch, in quest of some article which he urgently required for immediate use. The two buildings were nearly a score miles apart, but to men who are bred and brought up in the saddle, that distance meant but a pleasant little ride, and the sturdy cowboy was not long on the way, though the purpose of his ride was quickly forgotten in the startling discovery which awaited him.

It was probably two hours after sunset when he reached the Ellis Ranch, to find it seemingly deserted by all human life, the contents of the building apparently turned topsy-turvy, and the corrals in which he knew the choicest stock was habitually kept, with bars down and walls empty.

Startled, Kenworthy searched the vicinity, until his attention was attracted by a hollow groan, followed by a feeble voice calling for help. Five minutes later, he was listening to a thrilling account of a raid by horse-thieves, told in weak and husky accents by one whose life was rapidly ebbing out from a half-dozen ghastly wounds.

Death came to the sufferer's relief, before he had told all, but Kenworthy had gleaned sufficient to set him on the correct trail.

Not long after Frank Ellis and his men—all save one of those employed on the ranch, he being left as guard, greatly against his will, for he, too, loved the fair child of his employer and longed to have a share in rescuing her from the grip of the kidnapper—rode away in hot haste after the mad rider of the black marvel, a strong force of men rode up to the ranch, and shooting him down without warning, collected and drove away with all of the choice horses.

Seemingly dead, the faithful fellow watched them until they vanished from view, then, feeling that he had received his death-wounds, he painfully dragged himself to a smooth, moist patch of ground, and on it briefly scrawled the most essential facts; the number of the raiders, the direction they took in departing, and the hour when the blow was struck.

"The last words he said was to hunt you up an' say that he did the best he knowed how, but that the p'izen cusses was too hefty fer him single-handed. He said fer me to hunt you out, an' showed me the way you rid off, then muttered somethin' about Miss Lina, as the black blood shet off his voice fer good an' all," huskily muttered the cowboy, brushing a sleeve across his eyes with an involuntary motion.

"I'll bear that in mind when I meet those rascals!" muttered the ranchero, showing more emotion than he had on hearing that all his highly-prized stock was stolen.

Kenworthy resumed his report, which may be briefly condensed as follows:

Remounting, he rode at full speed back to the Applebee Ranch and told his story. The colonel immediately sent out word to the neighboring ranches, himself starting with a force for the deserted ranch to take up the trail of the thieves, bidding Kenworthy select a good horse and bear him company.

With them went the pack of hounds for which the Applebee Ranch was noted far and wide, and giving Kenworthy a couple of the truest, the colonel set him on the trail of the ranchero, while he followed the broad spoor left behind by the thieves.

Thanks to the light of the moon and the regularity with which old "Sweet-lips" sent out her low, musical note, the cowboy found no difficulty in keeping close at the heels of the hounds, who brought him to the scene of action as detailed.

By this time a bountiful supply of meat was cooked, and the cowboys began dropping in, guided by the bright glow of the camp fire, until all of their number were present, not a single horse of all those stampeded by Captain Fly-by-Night being missing.

While the others hastily dispatched the food provided for them, Burt, Lance, and Percy withdrew a little apart from the main party, conversing in low, guarded tones.

Frank Ellis briefly informed his men of the raid on the ranch and the sad fate of their mate who had been left in charge, adding:

"We'll set out at once and get square with those cursed thieves, if we have to trail them clean to the infernal regions and back again. I swore they should never raid me twice, and now I'll show them how well I can keep my word."

A hearty cheer broke from the reckless cowboys, to whom the prospect of a long ride with a hot fight at the end of the race, was more welcome than an invitation to a wedding.

But not a sound came from either of the young rancheros, and instead of hastening away to saddle and bridle their horses, with the rest, they set about cutting off fresh meat and making preparations for cooking it.

Frank Ellis saw this, and approached them, saying, a little impatiently:

"It's hardly worth while to waste time at that, friends. We can stock up at the ranch, for we'll have to give our nags a little rest when we get there, anyway."

"We wish you all good luck, neighbor, and trust you will not only recover your horses, but read those rascals a lesson which will not soon be forgotten by their kind."

"In which you will take your part, of course?"

"We'd like to, but the fact is, your plan and ours does not run together," quietly replied Burt.

"Crawfishin', by the 'tarnal!' cried Big Ben Dick. "I hed a notion thar was too much talk thar fer much work, an' now I'm plum sure of it. He's got enough a'ready!"

Fire flashed in the youth's eyes, as his revolver jumped forth and stared the giant full in the face.

"Drop that, you overgrown brute!" grated the lad. "Another slur like that, and I'll drill a hole clean through that fool head of yours. When I've done the work I have on hand, I'll dare you to repeat your words, man to man."

Frank Ellis caught the angry giant by the arm and pushed him aside, his voice stern and hard as he thundered:

"To your horse, Dick, and not another word from your lips on that score, unless you want to settle with me! And you, Mr. Applebee, accept my thanks for the services you have already rendered, and forgive me for presuming to expect more from you, as a friend and neighbor. We can do without you."

"Now you're getting up your back without cause," sharply retorted Burt, his honest face flushing. "You think we're afraid of hard riding, with a show of a fight at the other end of the trail; but right there's where your off your nut."

"If it hadn't been for me, Cap. Fly-by-Night would have been lynched by your men, and poor Dan Cheering be still in the land of the living. As I stood beside his corpse, I swore that I would know no rest until I had avenged his death—that I would follow Captain Fly-by-Night, and never turn aside from his trail until I killed or captured him. I meant every word I said then. I'll bring him in, dead or alive!"

"Percy and I both duplicate that oath, Mr. Ellis," said Lance, more quietly, but none the less resolutely. "We can do it, thanks to old Sweet-lips and Jolly-boy here. With them, we can run the rascal to earth and break down that wonderful horse of his if necessary."

"I ask pardon for doubting you, even for a moment," said the ranchero, extending his hands to the lads in turn. "But still I think you are wrong. The cunning rascal wants us to follow him, and thus give his men time to get clear with their booty. He'll give you the slip, when he has played with you long enough, or when he finds only a portion of the party is after him. Better go with us. If we succeed in catching up with the main gang be sure we'll find him with them."

"We can tell better when all is over, and the roll called," laughed Burt, all traces of anger vanishing. "I'm betting that we bring in the

most valuable lot of meat, even if it won't make the biggest pile to look at."

"Good fortune follow you, since you won't listen to reason," said the ranchero, a little provoked at finding them so obstinate. "We can't waste any more time in idle talk."

While the brothers were thus engaged, Percy adroitly slipped aside, and when the ranchero turned to assist his daughter on the horse set aside for her use, she was just parting from the handsome young ranchero, her face all aglow.

In silence the young trailers watched the party mount their horses and ride rapidly away toward the distant ranch.

"Now for our part of the job," said Burt, his young face hard and stern, as he entered the mountain pocket and stood beside the rude mound which marked the spot where poor Dan Cheering lay, temporarily buried by his pard, until a more decent funeral could be afforded.

"Here, above the bloody corpse of the poor fellow who was so foully murdered by the man I saved from death, I repeat my oath of vengeance. If I fail to make it good, through fault of my own, may the grave give up its dead to curse me from now to eternity! May I never know rest or happiness in this world! May my dearest hopes turn to ashes between my lips—amen!"

CHAPTER XI.

TRAILED TO HIS DOOM.

IN stern silence the three young avengers bared their heads and clasped hands across the grave of Dan Cheering.

Then they turned away from the lonely tomb beneath the honey-locust tree, and leaving the mountain pocket, hastily completed their preparations for taking the trail of Captain Fly-by-Night.

These were simple. A supply of meat was packed, their canteens filled from the spring, their horses equipped, a few cheering words spoken to the two hounds, both of which seemed to feel that there was something more than an ordinary hunt before them; then mounting, they set out for the point where the stampeded animals had scattered, leaving the audacious horse-thief to ride on without other company than Black Wolf.

They were not long in reaching this point, and there, clearly impressed upon the plain, they found the track of the man whom they had sworn to trail to his doom.

"It looks as though he *wanted* to be followed," muttered Percy, as Burt dismounted to make sure that this was the trail of the black stallion.

"I haven't the slightest doubt but what that is precisely what he *did* want," said Lance, quietly.

"Then you believe Ellis was correct in his reasoning?"

"I do, as far as he went. Captain Fly-by-Night has won the reputation of being the most skillful and daring horse-thief in all the West. The records show that he has a right to that title; but look at this job. If read alone by what shows on the surface, it would prove him

a clumsy bungler; for a boy could have kept those horses together, with this wall to aid him, after the stock was once set a-going. Or, if by any mistake they had gotten the better of him, and he really wanted to slip away from those in pursuit, he would take to the rocks instead of leaving such a trail as this, plain enough for a blind man to read without spectacles."

"Then we're playing right into his hand by following?"

Lance shrugged his shoulders as he looked toward Burt.

"What else can we do? You heard the boy? He'd follow on if he had to go alone, and the trail led him straight through Hades itself. It's a fool's job, but he's my brother."

"Oh, I'm not grumbling," was the swift response. "We three can give a pretty good-sized army enough amusement to keep them from falling asleep in meeting—only I wanted to get an idea of what was really before us."

While the cousins were engaged in conversation, Burt was following the single trail on foot, studying its various peculiarities in order to recognize the imprints whenever or wherever he might see them again, and making sure that he was indeed working the trail of Black Wolf and his master.

Then he put Sweet-lips and Jolly-boy on the trail, petting and talking to them in a manner they readily understood, judging from their whimpering and eager caresses. And as he leaped into the saddle, the sagacious hounds ran along the trail, lifting it rapidly but silent-tongued.

After the lesson given them by the young ranchero, little fear of their alarming their prey by opening on the trail, no matter how hot the scent might grow.

For mile after mile the trail led the young avengers along the base of the range, so plainly imprinted that they could have followed it without the aid of the hounds, and from the saddle at a gallop; but then all at once it made a sharp turn to the right, and entered the broken ground, by way of a narrow, winding defile.

Now the great value of the hounds as trailers became apparent, for they led the way at a pace which thoroughly tested the powers of the horses, and more than once Burt had to check their ardor where the narrow trail grew more difficult.

Steadily on, until the sun reached the zenith, without catching sight of their human game. Burt made no signs of an intention to stop, though their horses were growing jaded by the rapid, difficult traveling. Still, he made no open objection when Lance called off the hounds and checked the chase.

It was a "dry camp," but there was a little grass for the animals to pick at, and this, with an hour's rest, would benefit them greatly.

But few words passed between the young avengers as they reclined in the shade, awaiting the moment for resuming the trail. Burt was sober and stern, very unlike his usual merry self, and the great change in him had its corresponding effect on his companions.

There is no necessity for tracing them, step by step, on that long and weary trail, for the

afternoon was spent in a manner precisely similar to the few hours immediately before the noon halt, and only one incident worthy of record broke the painful monotony.

It was a little past the middle of the afternoon, when Burt, who was riding closest to the hounds, suddenly leaped from his saddle and grasped the dogs by the neck, crying:

"To cover, boys! Crowd close to the left-hand rocks!"

Without a moment's hesitation, Lance and Percy obeyed, knowing full well that Burt would not use that tone unless the necessity was urgent, but rapidly as they moved, the keen-eyed youth saw that they were too late, and something very like an oath broke from his lips as he muttered:

"No use! the dirty cuss has seen us!"

The lips of his comrades parted to ask what he meant, but then there was no necessity for the waste of breath, for they caught sight of a human figure standing on the crest of a rock, rather more than a mile distant, waving a hat above his head as though signaling them, or in derisive defiance.

"That's the p'izen cuss we're after!" muttered Burt, gripping his rifle viciously as he stared at the distant figure. "Ef only he bain't made out the dogs, I don't care so much!"

"It's too far off to be sure he's the man we want," said Lance, naturally more conservative; but scarcely had the words passed his lips when another shape was clearly outlined against the clear sky above the rocks.

This was the tall, short-bodied outline of a black horse, and as the man leaped into the saddle, Burt cried:

"That's plain enough, ain't it? I might mistake the man, at long range, but if that ain't Black Wolf, I'll eat my hat!"

"It's a little too plain," said Lance, seriously, as the audacious outlaw waved his hat again, then shook his clinched fist defiantly toward them, before wheeling his horse and vanishing from sight behind the rock. "He has sighted us, no doubt about that. He wants us to follow him, too. He'd hardly be so bold, without being sure he had the deadwood on us. Ten to one he's got a trap set for us if we nibble at the bait!"

"There's two sides to the question, and I look at the opposite one," said Burt, grimly. "If the dirty imp had made us out for just what we are—if he knew that we three were the only ones following him—he wouldn't have shown up in that fashion. He'd know that Ellis and his men were on the other tack, and he'd make the best of his way to warn or aid his men with the stolen stock. As it stands, he is just playing the game he first marked out, and if he hasn't spotted the dogs, we'll drop on him this very night sure!"

Lance was silenced, if not convinced, by this swift reasoning, and once more the avengers took up the trail.

Burt went in advance as the rock was neared on the top of which Captain Fly-by-Night had shown himself and horse, the others keeping back until it was proven that there was no trap set behind the barrier. And when the hounds were brought forward they quickly struck off

the trail again and led the way through the broken ground at a steady pace.

Not for long, however. When a patch of softer soil was reached, and Burt saw that the fugitive was proceeding leisurely, he called a halt, and it was resolved to *cache* and wait until the shades of night should fall to cover their movements, for if the outlaw should discover the fact that he was being trailed with hounds, he would hasten his flight, and it would come to a test of horses, in which the marvelous black stallion would almost certainly come off first best.

"If we don't crowd him too close," said Burt, "the imp will go into camp afore many hours, an' with the dogs to lead us we can run him down before day easy enough. He won't be looking for us in the dark, and we can take him alive."

There was sound judgment in this reasoning, and both of the others readily agreed to the plan. Unsaddling their nags and lariatting them out where they could obtain some grazing, they lay down to catch a little much-needed sleep.

Burt was not one to oversleep himself when so much was at stake, and promptly as the sun sunk to rest, he was afoot and preparing for the renewal of the death-hunt.

Lest the hounds should get too great a start of them in the darkness, Burt coupled them together and held them in leash, proceeding on foot, while Lance and Percy followed with the horses.

For hour after hour Burt led the way thus, the hounds tugging at the leash as though the trail were growing warm, true to their warning, making not a sound that could alarm the horse-thief prematurely.

Still on, until the night was almost half spent, then Burt jerked the hounds to a standstill, his eyes riveted on a tiny spark of fire which suddenly shot up in the darkness, some rods in advance, and considerably below the level on which he then stood.

A warning hiss checked his comrades, and kneeling with a hand clutching the muzzle of each hound, the young avenger glared at the point of light, which was steadily growing larger and more brilliant.

His breath came hot and panting, as a bright flame shot up and shone fairly into the face of a human being—on the face of Captain Fly-by-Night himself!

That was quite sufficient for Burt, and still holding the jaws of the hounds, he cautiously backed away until at the side of his companions, when he softly whispered:

"The p'izen cuss is over in the hollow, building a fire. We've got him, dead to rights, if we play our cards for all they're worth."

"You're sure it's the man?" asked Lance, in the same cautious voice. "And is he alone?"

"It's him, sure enough. I didn't see any others. But even if there's a thousand to back him, I'm going to corral the rascal—mind that!" grated Burt, viciously.

Hastily tying the hounds to a point of rock, and warning them in pantomime to remain quiet, Burt tore off his flannel shirt and cut it into bits, which he proceeded to wrap around

the hoofs of his horse. His example was promptly imitated by Lance and Percy, who made use of a blanket, and in ten minutes from the time the alarm was given, the horses were "soft-shod."

"Percy will stay here to make sure neither dogs nor horses give the alarm. Lance, you'll come with me. Fetch your rope. We may need it to take the slippery cuss alive."

There was no remonstrance, for when Burt once made up his mind, little short of a thunderbolt could shake him, and the enemy was too near by for them to risk an argument.

Stealthily, silently the two brothers stole down into the hollow, guided by the bright light of a small fire, near which Captain Fly-by-Night knelt, bathing and bandaging the fore-leg of his famous black stallion, audibly muttering:

"It's cursed hard luck, old fellow, for both you and me! May the devil grind that infernal loose stone to powder! Just when I need your speed the most you must fall a cripple!"

"Those fools showed more wit than I suspected, or they'd never have picked out our trail so rapidly. But I wouldn't care for that, only for this cursed accident! We should be a score of miles away from this, riding hard to join our mates, leaving those blockheads under Fool Ellis to puzzle out the enigma as best they can. Curse the luck, again and again!"

Burt moved a little closer to his brother, grinning until his white teeth gleamed through the gloom. By signs he made Lance understand that he was to capture the black stallion, while he made sure of Captain Fly-by-Night, touching their lariats as the weapons to be used, then as silently moving to one side, that they both might have free swing for their ropes when ready for the important casts.

Silently they both arose to their feet, waiting for the proper moment, which was not long delayed.

Captain Fly-by-Night finished bandaging the sprained limb, then rose erect, little dreaming how near he was to his doom at the hands of the very ones whom he had been sneering at as fools and blockheads.

A hissing signal, then the snake-like coils shot through the air and settled, one around the neck of the black stallion, the other over the head and shoulders of the horse-thief.

The latter cast was made by Burt, and the instant he saw that his aim had not failed him, he jumped back and jerked heavily on the rope, hurling the astonished outlaw to the rocky soil, head-foremost.

Lance was not so fortunate, for the black horse resisted the shock, rearing back for a moment, then, with a wild scream of rage, he plunged forward with gleaming teeth and glowing eyes, as though seeking to crush the rope-thrower beneath his iron-shod hoofs.

Lance leaped nimbly aside, giving the slackened lasso a snake-like twist that sent a double coil around the fore-legs of the stallion, then taking a couple of turns around a rock. With a savage pluck, the rope tightened, and Black Wolf was cast headlong, Lance running out and securely hopping him before he could arise.

CHAPTER XII.

BURT KEEPS HIS OATH.

"HURRAY for we, us and company!" screamed Burt, as he leaped upon the stunned form of the outlaw, and hastily removed his belt of weapons, then wound the rawhide lasso about his body until he could move neither hand nor foot. "Come down, Percy, and see the circus! Free, gratis for nothing!"

Captain Fly-by-Night quickly recovered his senses, but it was too late for him to struggle or kick against the pricks.

He was unarmed, bound, helpless in the power of the young avengers who had so solemnly sworn to bring him in, dead or alive, and all his mad fury at being so completely outwitted availed him nothing.

"It ain't no manner of use, my covey!" laughed Burt, standing over his captive, as the latter struggled desperately to free himself. "You're trussed up to stay, and the sooner you make up your mind to that, the better."

"Hell's bitterest curses forever blast you!" the villain panted, ceasing his mad wrastlings against fate only when his strength failed him. "I'll get even with you for this foul trick, and make you wish you'd never been born!"

"Look here, *you!*" and as he squatted down beside his captive, Burt's honest face glowed sternly in the light of the fire. "Let me talk a little."

"I took you once before, but like a pesky fool, I wouldn't let the boys string you up, as you deserved. I risked my life to save you from the rope, and what was the result? You murdered a man who had never done you an injury. You stampeded our stock, and tried to throw dust in our eyes while your men made off with their booty."

"For all of that, I blamed myself, and I took an oath over the grave of the man you butchered, to follow your trail until I brought you back, dead or alive. Ellis went on to chase your pack of thieves, but we came this way. We had bounds to track you, and you see the result. I've captured you. I mean to hold you, alive if I can; but I take you back to the Ellis Ranch, as I swore I would, dead or alive—mind *that!*"

For once in his life, Captain Fly-by-Night had nothing to say for himself. This sudden capture had unmanned him for the time being, and his usual audacity wholly deserted him.

Burt had Captain Fly-by-Night carried to the base of a slender rock column, and placed against it in a sitting posture, then bound firmly to the rock. Black Wolf was securely tied, and then the fire was trampled out, lest its glow should attract dangerous visitors. Lance and Percy lay down to sleep, Burt refusing to allow them to share his vigil. And squatting before the captive, with revolver drawn and cocked, he passed the remainder of the night.

With the first gleams of dawn he awoke his comrades, and a hasty breakfast was made off the cold bear-steak, Captain Fly-by-Night being fed bit by bit by Burt.

The outlaw seemed more like himself when the day came, and with cool insolence he of-

fered to bet Burt that he would foil him even yet.

"I never was born to be hung, and you'll say the same before this day comes to an end," he laughed, carelessly.

"There's only one way for you to avoid it," said Burt, seriously. "If we run into your gang of thieves, you may miss the rope, but you'll not escape my lead. Dead or alive, remember! I'll keep my oath if I live. If I die, you'll be first to take up the long trail ahead of me."

Little time was spent over the morning meal. Black Wolf was brought up, and while Burt held him under the muzzle of his pistol, Captain Fly-by-Night was unbound sufficiently to sit astride his saddle after the customary fashion, when Lance and Percy lifted him into it. Then his ankles were tied beneath the belly of Wolf, and another rope fastened him to the high pommel and cantle of the Mexican saddle.

In addition to all this, Burt took the precaution to pass the noose of his lasso around the throat of the black stallion, though the long-legged horse limped with a severe sprain in his right forefoot.

Captain Fly-by-Night recklessly scoffed at the lad, for taking all these precautions, but never an answer got he, and ere long he relapsed into sullen silence.

Steadily the little cavalcade made their way through the rocks, not following the back trail, but heading straight for the Ellis Ranch, turning to one side or the other only when the nature of the ground made it necessary, but as often regaining their former course the moment it became practicable.

Despite the lameness of Black Wolf, it was not far along in the afternoon when the little party drew near the edge of the broken ground, and suddenly a reckless laugh escaped the sneering lips of the prisoner, as he cried:

"Is it poetical justice you're yearning for, boy? If so, now's your chance! There's the crag from which I threatened to cast charming Lina Ellis. You can save yourself all further trouble by tumbling me over the precipice!"

"Dead or alive, I said," quietly replied Burt. "But I prefer to take you alive. I'd rather the hangman should stain his hands, than—"

So far he spoke, but no further, for just at that moment Black Wolf seemed to become possessed of the devil, and with a frightful scream, he lashed out with his heels and leaped to the side on which Burt was riding, coming into such sudden and violent collision with the young rancho's horse, that it was overthrown before Burt could clear the way or save even himself. The same wild gyration drove the animals of Lance and Percy aside, making them dance and snort with affright.

A shrill, mocking laugh from the desperado, then Black Wolf plunged forward with such force that the lasso was dragged from its hold on the saddle of the fallen lad.

"Hold! or I shoot!" screamed Burt, struggling to regain his feet, only to be foiled, for his leg was pinned beneath his horse. "Shoot the black demon, boys! Don't let him escape!"

"I said I'd cheat the gallows!" cried Captain

Fly-by-Night, plunging straight for the crag over which he had held Lina Ellis suspended. "You may take me *dead*—never *alive*!"

A cry of horror escaped the lips of the young men, for as those last words came to their ears, Black Wolf gave vent to a wild, demoniac neigh, then leaped straight out over the crag!

Sick at heart, the young avengers dismounted from their terrified animals, and approached the precipice. One glance over the dizzy height, then they shrunk back, covering their eyes to shut out that horrible sight.

Truly, Captain Fly-by-Night had said he would cheat the hangman out of his dues—that though they might carry his body back to appease offended justice, that was all!

The shades of night were beginning to descend over the plain when the Ellis Ranch began to loom up, clear and distinct to the eager eyes of three young men who were riding toward the buildings at a slow trot. Their horses were worn and jaded, three in number; yet one of them bore a double load.

Across the back of another lay bound a long bundle, the blanket which formed the covering showing broad stains of blood, not yet entirely dry.

Those three riders were Burt, Lance, and Percy Applebee. That blood-stained bundle contained all that remained of the once bold and dashing Captain Fly-by-Night.

"Look!" suddenly exclaimed Burt, lifting himself high in the stirrups and shading his eyes with one hand as he gazed intently past the ranch toward a moving body which was almost as far from the buildings as themselves. "By all that's good! Yonder is Ellis and his men!"

"And they've got back their horses!" ejaculated Lance, no less excited by the discovery.

"I can make out two—three bound men!" contributed Percy. "They've caught the rascals and made them pay for the trouble, too!"

"Well, I'm not altogether ashamed to meet them," muttered Burt, with a side-glance at the blood-stained bundle carried on the third horse. "I said dead or alive. I hoped the last, and it wasn't our fault that it is the other."

Turning their horses so as to keep the buildings between themselves and the other party, the young avengers spurred their wearied animals into a gallop, and succeeded in gaining the ranch before the other band of horsemen.

Then they dashed out, to be greeted with cries of surprise as they drew rein.

"I see you have been successful in catching the rascals, Mr. Ellis," said Burt easily.

"Thanks to your uncle, Burt," was the cheery reply. "He ran them to earth, and held them there until we came up on the trail. We took them front and rear, and scooped them in without losing a man. Killed seven and captured three. If Captain Fly-by-Night was with them, he got away during the confusion—but I'll have him yet, if it takes a leg!"

"You can have him for a much less price than that, my dear sir," laughed Burt, as he put his fingers to his lips and emitted a shrill whistle, that brought his well-trained horse bearing that bloody burden out from the rear of the ranch.

"I told you I'd bring in the fellow, dead or alive, and there he is!"

"Dead!" ejaculated the ranchero, seeming to doubt the evidence of his eyesight.

"He killed himself rather than wait for hanging. He jumped his horse over the rock on which he had Miss Lina when we captured him the first time."

As the cowboys flocked around, Burt strode up to Big Ben Dick, and cried sternly:

"Now, you overgrown lubber! I dare you to repeat those words, man to man! Spit it out, or take water!"

"In I go, head over heels!" exclaimed the giant, with a sheepish glance from the bloody bundle to the glowing face and snapping eyes of the little game cock. "I was a fool, an' take it all back, boss. You're a major, an' I chaw dirt if you say so. I tuck you fer a blow-squirt, but I got mighty bad fooled, an' I ain't ashamed fer to own it up. Kin I say more?"

"Put it thar, pard!" laughed Burt, slapping his plump palm into the horny hand of the grinning cowboy. "And next time don't jump on a fellow simply because he ain't quite as big as you are, for the best of us are liable to get fooled."

There is no necessity for many more words, even did time and space permit, for this episode in the life of the Colorado Boys has all been placed before the reader.

The suspicions of Burt were confirmed ere many more months, and when Percy Applebee led the blushing Lina Ellis before the minister who was to unite them in the holiest of all bonds, the merriest person there was Lance Applebee. If he felt sore, no one was the wiser for it.

Nor was Percy "spoiled," as Burt dreaded. Though a more devoted husband never lived, he still found time to join his cousins in their hunts and expeditions.

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